UNIFORM EDITION OF THE NOVELS

BY

# PHILIP GIBBS

# OLIVER'S KIND WOMEN

1907

In days to come Sir Philip will be remembered as a novelist of the people whose stories are imbued with sincerity and an optimism that the man in the street finds particularly comforting. He writes in and of a time when the world seems a little mad, and his sanity, his belief in the vast possibilities of his own age, and lastly his sympathy for and understanding of youth, make him a writer whose books are treasured by all who would know more intimately of the thoughts and ideals animating the rising generation.

# OLIVER'S KIND WOMEN

*A NOVEL*

By
PHILIP GIBBS

HUTCHINSON & CO. (Publishers), LTD.
PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.4

*FIRST PUBLISHED*
1911

REPRINTED
July 1923
3/6 NET EDITION

REPRINTED
October 1925

FIRST PRINTED IN UNIFORM EDITION
1929

*PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN*

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# Oliver's Kind Women

## CHAPTER I

### RASH YOUTH

Mr. Oliver Lumley was a young man of promise. He had good looks (in the mid-Victorian era he would have been called "Byronic"), good health, brains, a temperament, an ambition, and a spirit of adventure.

If I were still a young man I should pray the good fairies to give me those qualities. With these natural gifts the world seems an easy thing to conquer. With such an outfit a young man of twenty-three (Oliver Lumley was just on the verge of that) should travel far and fare well. Good looks and a gay heart are master-keys to open the gates of life. For a handsome young man with a fine, clear-cut face and lips that soften quickly to a smile may be shabbily dressed, may have no money to jingle in his pockets, may have no settled position in the world, but women will turn their heads his way and speak a word for him in good places, and grant a request which from a plain fellow, or from a man not ugly enough to be interesting, would be flouted. Therefore the first gateway on the path to progress is unlocked to him, for women guard many doors of the world's treasure-houses, and as the old saying is, kissing goes by favour. So young Mr. Oliver Lumley had unusual chances, for that he was a handsome lad few men denied, and no woman.

I have said that he had ambition, temperament, and a spirit of adventure. By ambition I do not mean that he aspired to be a millionaire or a Prime Minister. In spite of youth he had set himself limits, and they were well within the bounds of moderation. In the Wastrel Club (of Greek Street, Soho), where once a week he sat with a

few of his kindred spirits, he said more than once, through a haze of tobacco smoke, "My friends, I intend to be satisfied with £1,500 a year. I should loathe to be really rich. It smothers one's idealism. One becomes a slave in gilded chains."

At this time he was earning, irregularly, and with luck, about sixty shillings a week. His friends praised his moderation. Happening one night to be with two gentlemen who had just been called to the Bar, they had their eyes on a future in which it would be easy enough to pick up a good many thousands a year, with a Judgeship or an Attorney-Generalship as a quiet and remunerative rest-cure after they had borne the heat and burden of the day.

"Roly," said one of these newly-called barristers, trying to find the way to his own mouth with the stem of a churchwarden pipe (churchwardens were traditional in the Wastrels), and nearly putting out his left eye, with which he regarded his friend solemnly, while his other was half closed, "Roly, my boy, I think you are making a rotten, silly mistake with yourself, if I may say so as man to man. Forgive me, dear old chap, but why not abandon the flighty ways of that fickle jade—er—the Muse of Literature—what the deuce did she call herself? —and go in for the Law? The Law, old friend! Mighty fat in good things! Plenty of pickings, especially for a man of presence! You've got presence, Roly. Good-looking young buck, don't you know! All right with a wig on your noddle."

Oliver Lumley laughed, and traced his initials with the stem of a broken churchwarden in a puddle of whisky on the deal table (deal tables were also part of the tradition at the Wastrels).

"The Law? No, thanks, old fellow. I'm a Man of Letters. I've got a temperament."

It was perfectly true that he had a temperament. It is the story of that temperament which this book will endeavour to set down. I have not a very clear idea as to the meaning of the word—it is sometimes used by those who dislike the drudgery of life; but if it means a character not to be fastened down to squalid duties and humdrum tasks, Oliver Lumley had got it.

How and why are puzzles to me. By what strange throw-back of heredity, by what psychological or physiological conditions a child with a temperament had been born to a City clerk mated to a woman who was the sixth daughter of a Nonconformist minister in Peckham, is one of those problems which cry out for the scientist. A mere literary man is unable to form even a guess. But the fact was there in Oliver Lumley, second son of Richard Lumley, of Cutter & Bodger, Mincing Lane, E.C., and of 33, Rosemary Avenue, Denmark Hill, S.E.

Horace, the eldest son, had no temperament whatever. At the Camberwell Grammar School he was the model boy, on conventional lines; at the age of eighteen he had been appointed the juniorest junior in the Comet Assurance Company; at the age of twenty-six he was getting the respectable salary of £90 per annum, and was a good, quiet, steady fellow, fond of reading during the evenings at home, devoted, in his unemotional, reserved way, to his mother and father, and with a soft corner in his heart for his sister, Galatea, who was a typist in a City office. Horace had always admired Oliver, for the very qualities which he himself lacked, and especially for his spirit of adventure; but though they had been bedfellows for almost twenty years, he did not understand the brother whom he loved.

For Oliver had baffled all his people at home. Richard Lumley, the father, had year after year studied the annual reports brought home by his boys from school, and always an anxious look had crept into his grey eyes. Horace was nearly always top of his class, Oliver nearly always at the bottom. "Very bad at arithmetic"; "Extremely negligent of his home-lessons"; "Utterly unmethodical"; "High-spirited, but headstrong," were phrases familiar to an anxious father.

"My dear," said Richard Lumley to his wife, year after year, when these reports were brought home, "what shall we do with Oliver? Horace never gives me a moment's anxiety. He will be a comfort to us in our old age. But Oliver—he is very wild, very unsteady. I fear the poor boy will find it hard to settle down into the collar of life."

"I wish there were no collar," said Mrs. Lumley,

during one of these quiet talks between husband and wife. She put down the stocking she was knitting, and stared down at the red tablecloth, on which many blots of ink had been spilt. "Why should my dear, high-spirited boy be put into the collar? Why should he have the spirit crushed out of him by the awful drudgery of office work?"

She spoke quietly, but there was a queer vibration in her voice.

Richard Lumley lifted his eyes from his book. He was reading *The Mill on the Floss*, for the sixth time.

"Duty, darling," he said. "England expects—you know the rest."

"Duty!" said Mrs. Lumley. Her cheeks flushed, and the colour gave to her worn face a trace of that charm which had suggested her title of "The Rose of the Rye," to a descriptive reporter at the Peckham bazaar in aid of her father's chapel, twenty years ago. "I hate that word. It is so cruel. It has made slaves of you and me. It is always duty, duty, from morning till night. And then the children grow up, and they too will have to do their duty. Gradually they will lose all their freshness—Horace is already so pale that he frightens me; they will come home tired after a long day in a stuffy office, and they will become like you, Dick, not a man, but—a City clerk. Oh, that City! I hope to God Oliver will escape it! It is deadening!"

Richard Lumley had laid down his book, seeing that the bookmarker was in its place. He was staring at his wife, with a startled look on his face. At her last words a wave of colour mounted from his thin neck, with its rather prominent Adam's apple, to the forehead, made high by the hair having worn away in front. His thin lips tightened, the nostrils quivered. Into the grey eyes, which ordinarily gazed out upon the world with mild tranquillity, there crept a glint of anger.

"Alice, your words have hurt. Am I not a man? Have I been deadened?"

His wife put a hand across the table and stroked one of his.

"I did not mean *that*. But I mean that Oliver is

too full of life and restlessness to be tamed into a City clerk."

Unintentionally she had made her own words more stinging by that "tamed," and her husband winced as though she had pricked him with one of her needles. He opened his book and pretended to go on with his reading.

"Yes, I suppose I have been 'tamed.' But it has been in the service of my wife and children. . . . And the reward? Your boy Oliver has all your heart, and I have none of it."

That was a reproach he had made several times, and in late years Mrs. Lumley became familiar with it. A husband must always have one standing grievance for use in defence and attack. There was truth in it, too, which made it more effective; for though Mrs. Lumley was patient with a rather querulous husband, and devoted to Horace and Galatea, it was for Oliver that she put by little savings stinted from the housekeeping money; it was Oliver who with a kiss and a hug could bewitch her into giving consent after any denial; it was Oliver, rising year by year into a tall lad with wavy black hair and the fine profile of a Greek statue, who was nearly always in her thoughts, always in her prayers, and often in her dreams. She had told the only lies of her life to save him from scrapes in and out of school and from his father's eloquence of reproach. Once she had sold a few of her little trinkets (without Richard's knowledge and consent) to pay some debts incurred by Oliver at a confectioner's shop in Denmark Hill. The young rogue at sixteen years of age had bewitched the girl across the counter, who had let him go tick until the old lady who kept the shop demanded instant settlement of the account. Mrs. Lumley had wept over the episode in Oliver's career, for she could not square it with her own principles of morality.

"Oliver, my dearest boy, debt is the devil's trap. Your father and I have never owed a penny in the world. Promise me you will never get into debt again."

He promised, on his solemn word of honour, and then gave an entertaining account of old Mrs. Tufton when she threatened "to tell his poor ma of all his carryings on."

Mrs. Lumley laughed in spite of her sorrow at his sinfulness—"You know it was really wicked of you, Oliver," she said—and, in return for his pledge of honour never, never to get into debt again, she readily gave a promise when the boy said, "Look here, mother mine, don't you let on to the governor." For the truth was that the one man in the world of whom Oliver Lumley had a little fear was his father, whose principles on Duty and Honour were as fixed as the Pole star, whose mild eyes could look unutterable reproach, and who had constant suspicion of his second son's innate wildness and wantonness.

That suspicion was confirmed when at twenty years of age Oliver, who had spent two miserable, restless, and irritable years in a solicitor's office, came home one night with the news that he had got "the sack."

"And a jolly good job too, for I would rather starve to death than put up with such hideous slavery."

That was how he took his dismissal; and, as though a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders, he was in a prankish mood that night—gibed at Horace as a solemn old dog who was destined to live and die a bachelor, shocked his father, mother and sister by discoursing rather wildly upon liberty and love, and at an early hour went whistling to his room, where he read in bed till midnight. Then his mother, who had been lying still in her own bed listening for his footsteps to cross the floor on his way to the gas-bracket, came out of her room and tapped at his door.

"Put out your light, my dear boy. It is time you went to sleep. And it is such a waste of gas!"

He called her: "Mother mine!"

She opened the door in her blue dressing-gown, and stood by his bedside looking down at him as he sat up with his head propped against a pillow and a book on his knees, and a pipe on a little table by his side.

"It is so dangerous to smoke in bed! You know how father dislikes it."

"The governor dislikes such a lot of things I love."

He held his arms out to his mother, and she bent down and kissed him on the forehead. She marvelled at the splendour of his beauty as he lay there with the collar

of his night-shirt open at the throat and with his wavy black hair against the white pillow.

"I'm as chirpy as a cricket to-night. No more City slush for me, mother!"

"What are you going to do, Oliver? Your father cannot afford to keep you. We are miserably poor. Your earnings were a help. . . ."

"That's all right. I'm going to earn pots of money. You'll be driving in your own motor before you know where you are."

She half believed him, and was half afraid.

"Nothing rash, Oliver, I hope?"

"Rash?" he chuckled. "Perhaps. Anyhow, I'm going to have a shot at literature."

She did not understand him. Literature was a vague, meaningless word to her as a method of making money.

"Tell me about it," she said, and he laughed and told her to put out the light.

"Go away and sleep, little mother, while I think out my plans. I'm going to make the family fortune. Isn't that good enough for your dreams?"

He called her back as she went over to the gas-bracket.

"Mother, do you know how beautiful you are?"

"Oliver, what nonsense!"

She blushed like a girl who has been flattered by her sweetheart.

"Honour bright!"

She put out the light, and he heard her blow a kiss to him in the darkness and creep out of the room.

"I'd like to make a success, for her sake," said Oliver Lumley aloud in the darkness. Then he snuggled down in bed and slept immediately.

## CHAPTER II

### LOVE ON THE COMMON

OLIVER'S success did not come quickly. He spent a year at home, borrowing his brother's trousers when his own became too frayed at the edges and too baggy at the knees, getting sixpence a day from his mother to buy tobacco, with an occasional half-crown from Horace for an evening at the theatre, and now and again receiving a sovereign from his father, which, in Oliver's own phrase, came in "devilish handy."

His father became gloomy and despondent at the sight of his son at home. There were times when they quarrelled with hot words because Oliver refused obstinately to answer advertisements for junior clerkships, which his father cut out of the morning papers and gave him in the evening. Horace had pessimistic moods, when he told Oliver with brotherly candour that he was a lazy young devil and would inevitably go to the dogs. Galatea gibed at him continually as a ne'er-do-weel, and even his mother gazed at him with anxious eyes and asked him once a month whether he was right to go on like this.

"Quite right," said Oliver cheerfully. "Don't you worry, and all will be well. Am *I* worrying?"

He was not. He kept up his spirits amazingly well, though occasionally he had moments of passion, when he reproached his family for their lack of faith in such wild and whirling words that his mother went white to the lips and Galatea crimsoned to the tips of her ears.

All this time Oliver was in training for the sublime career of a Man of Letters. His studies were made chiefly in the Public Library, where he read through an immense number of short stories in the magazines, and observed human nature exhibited by the young ladies sitting at the tables. Some of them were distinctly

pretty, and some of them, by a remarkable coincidence, always met his eyes when he glanced their way. This in more than one case led to acquaintanceship outside the Library and to some charming adventures in gallantry which were useful to Oliver Lumley as a future novelist.

There was one girl, a Mignonette of France, whom he met by appointment on Clapham Common when she had a half-holiday from the High School (where she taught French to shopkeepers' daughters in return for her "keep") twice a week.

He kissed her one day under the shelter of an oak tree not far from the Round Pond. After that they corresponded daily—his letters being addressed to a sweet-stuff shop in the Old Town. She wrote continually and poured out her little palpitating heart to him, and he slept with her letters under his pillow. To her he wrote many brilliant essays on the great problems of life and the human heart—making a fair copy of them for future use, as some of his phrases were too good to be lost.

The idyll with Gabrielle le Brun ended as it had begun, under the oak tree by the Round Pond.

"Oliver, *cher ami*, I am come to say good-bye. It is not right that I should meet you any longer like this. In a week I marry myself to Mr. Tipping the music-master, of whom I tell you often. We set up house together quite soon, when he gets—what you call it?—a 'rise up.'"

Oliver Lumley went rather pale, and then rather red.

"What! Have you been fooling me all this time?"

He was angry. His pride was hurt. He had given the best of his brain and heart to this little French minx. He had also borrowed a good many shillings from Horace to buy her flowers and trinkets.

"You are broken-'earted! My poor boy!"

She looked at him with her head slightly on one side, and pressing her white muff to her bosom.

He laughed furiously.

"No, I shall not break my heart. I shall only think that women are as selfish and callous as she-devils."

There was a scene under the oak tree, watched from a distance by a butcher-boy with a basket on his head.

Gabrielle shed a few tears, and Oliver was constrained

to kiss them away. But it was her turn to get angry when he refused to send back her letters. She had brought all of his in her muff, and he seized them from her and tore them up, scattering their pieces to the wind. The butcher-boy, whirling his basket, had a paper-chase.

"If you is a gentleman of honour I demand my letters."

"I shall keep them as a proof of your infidelity."

"*Quelle lâcheté!*"

They walked back together, a yard apart, to the High School.

"Good morning!" said Oliver. He lifted his hat and strode away with a gloomy face.

A few weeks later he saw her in the High Street. She was leaning on the arm of a sandy-haired little man, who, no doubt, was Mr. Tipping. They were looking at a suite of bedroom furniture to be obtained on the hire system. Oliver gave an ironical laugh, and Gabrielle le Brun started and turned her head. Their eyes met. The girl cut him dead, as we say.

It was the last time he saw her. But he used some of her letters, with the details of her girlhood in Paris, for a short story, which was accepted by a monthly magazine. They paid him five pounds for it, and he reckoned that Gabrielle had paid him back, with interest, for the presents he had given to her and for his intellectual and moral damage.

But he forgot to pay back Horace, who had advanced the money for this love affair. He bought himself his first dress suit. It had velvet buttons and a broad silk stripe down each leg. He looked like a young duke in it.

## CHAPTER III

### A MAN OF LETTERS

It was not the first story presented to the world under the signature of Oliver Lumley. Towards the end of the year of rather disappointing experiments in the art of fiction, Oliver had got into his stride. By diligent reading of the magazines he learnt the tricks of the trade. He discovered that too much striving for originality is a mistake. Familiar situations worked up with a new touch, conventional characters under different names, bright, scrappy dialogues, a little tenderness of sentiment, a sparkle of humour, are the ingredients of the most marketable fiction, and when you have learnt the knack of it, it is quite easy. Oliver Lumley borrowed his plots according to the admirable French philosophy "*Je prends mon bien où je le trouve*," and, having adopted this method in the place of his earlier and more agonising efforts to spin a golden web of thought out of his own knowledge and emotions, he achieved a success which startled his family and satisfied his own self-esteem.

He did not make a fortune, you understand, but six short stories were accepted out of fifteen in five months and brought him the sum of £24 10s. Oliver Lumley was satisfied with this as a good beginning to a literary career. It enabled him to buy many little luxuries which his heart desired, including three new suits, a pair of excellent patent-leather boots, a number of fancy ties and socks, a pair of riding-breeches and gaiters (which would go very well with a horse when he could afford one, and were impressive to the inhabitants of Denmark Hill even when he walked in them), and a silk dressing-gown, in which he would sit of an evening when thinking out new subjects for his pen and the various steps of his high-mounting career. It is true that he did not as yet see his way to contribute anything to the household accounts,

nor did he pay back his small debts to Horace. But he took his mother and Galatea to the theatre one night, he bought a new edition of *Middlemarch* for his father, and to Horace, who liked a good cigar, he gave a box of pretty good Havanas. They were pleased with his generosity, and awed by his rapid rise to fame.

His father, especially, was profoundly moved by the knowledge that he had produced a literary son. As each story appeared he read it again and again, and never lost his sense of wonderment that it should have been written by Oliver. But there was his boy's name in big letters—"A Complete and Original Story by Oliver Lumley."

If the words had been written in letters of gold they could not have dazzled him more. For literature of any kind, for anything written and printed, he had an old-fashioned reverence. He believed everything in his daily paper. A work of imagination, even if it were no longer than a short story, seemed to him a wonderful effort of the brain. He could not understand how his own child could have learnt the secrets of the human heart, nor how he could have plunged so deeply into the problems of life. Sometimes over the breakfast-table, or in the evening, he would stare stealthily at the boy, as though trying to fathom this mystery in his own household. He was almost frightened of him. He was certainly somewhat nervous of the handsome fellow who dressed like the son of a peer (instead of being the son of Cutter & Bodger's under-paid clerk), who had expensive tastes, which Richard Lumley himself had never dreamed, who in his gay, careless, devil-may-care way expressed his open contempt for the plain and simple life which his father had considered to be the height of prosperity for people of his class.

One of the proudest moments of his life was when a fellow clerk said, "I have been reading a story by Oliver Lumley in *The Empire Magazine*. A relative of yours?"

"My son," said Richard Lumley.

Not only his father, but Mrs. Lumley, Horace and Galatea looked upon Oliver with a new admiration and a sense of awe. Mrs. Lumley's pride in her son's achievements was very great, though her natural humility bade

her conceal this among her friends and neighbours when they spoke to her of her "brilliant boy."

But she was rather scared at his success. There was a secret fear in her heart that he would get too "grand" for their humble home-life. And she too watched him sometimes above her needlework, studying him as he sat reading in one of his new suits—poor old Horace was very shabby by the side of him—with the cuffs of his new shirts so white and spotless, and he seemed to her like some Prince Charming. She could not think where he got his ideas, his almost terrifying ambitions, his extravagant desires. Not from her did he inherit them. She was content—nearly always—to make beds and puddings, to mend socks and under-garments, and to do the daily drudgery of a small house in a quiet suburb. It almost seemed as if this boy, with his desire for the beautiful things of the world, for a society which she only knew by the fashionable intelligence in *The Daily Telegraph*, and for the great gay world, must have been a changeling put into the cradle which she had rocked twenty-one years ago!

Horace and Galatea expressed, in different ways, somewhat similar ideas.

"My dear old chap," said Horace one night, in the bedroom which they had shared in common until Oliver had taken possession of the attic as a bed-sitting-room and study, "I can't think where you get your imagination from. That last story of yours is a stunner. I couldn't have thought it out to save my life."

Oliver laughed.

"My dear old fellow, I'm not worrying where the ideas come from. I am only a 'prentice hand as yet. These are the first crude experiments. When I have got my pen well tempered then you can begin to talk. One of these days I shall be making my £1,500 a year." Horace did not disbelieve him; but the fact made him thoughtful.

"At that time I shall be earning at the most £175. That's my limit. I'm one of the stick-in-the-muds."

Oliver put his hand on his older brother's shoulder.

"Never you mind. Your young brother ain't going to forget his best pal!"

"One of these days you'll be ashamed of me," said Horace.

"Rot!" said Oliver.

Galatea, who had been rather scornful of Oliver's literary pretentions, was now humble before him. His fine clothes gave him a kind of nobility in her eyes. To walk down Denmark Hill with him was an exciting adventure, for all her girl friends were envious. Certainly he looked like a young duke.

"Oliver," she said one day, quite suddenly, as she sat toasting her toes before a glowing fire, with a book on her lap, "when you get to know good people—people outside this suburban set—don't forget you have a sister."

"My dear old kid, you may bet your boots I shall never forget that! What are you driving at?"

Galatea held her hands before the fire and her face. Perhaps it was the heat that had put a warm flush into her cheeks.

"One of these days I may want to marry. I don't want to grow into an old maid. I should like to meet some nice men."

She spoke quite frankly and with simplicity.

Oliver looked at her curiously. Almost for the first time he realised that his sister was above the average in good looks. He told her so.

"Nice men will like to meet you. You're a deuced pretty kid, you know."

Her words set his imagination on fire, and he painted glowing pictures of the marriages he would arrange for her. She pulled him up, with a gay laugh, by the reminder that she could marry only one man.

"That's all right," said Oliver. "You'll be able to take your choice. I shan't leave you in this suburban squalor."

## CHAPTER IV

### FATHER AND SON

At this time, it will be remembered, the name of Oliver Lumley had appeared only six times in the public prints. But he had a fair supply of unpublished stories, his imagination was vivid, and he could safely, or at least hopefully, assume that he was well on his way to luck.

Nevertheless, a literary man is not as other men. His temperament (whatever may be the exact meaning of the word) requires careful nursing. His imagination must be stimulated and nourished by emotional experiences and a full knowledge of life. His heart-beats must be quickened by the electricity of social intercourse. So, at least, the literary man asks us to believe. Oliver Lumley was not slow to realise the necessity of these things. He complained that the atmosphere of Denmark Hill was not good for him. He stifled in it.

"But, my dear boy," said Mrs. Lumley, "everybody says that it is most healthy. Now, Clapham is much more relaxing."

Oliver laughed heartily.

"My dear lady, by atmosphere I don't mean the air that feeds the body. The mental horizon here is too limited."

Mrs. Lumley did not understand his words, but, with a sinking heart, she understood his purpose. After various hints dropped from time to time he finally declared his intention of going into "diggings" in the West of London—"the great human heart," as he called it in the new language which he had adopted with his literary career.

He had been exploring, and had found the most ideal crib for his purpose in a little street under the shadow of Big Ben and at the back of the Abbey. The houses were all of the Queen Anne period. They had panelled

rooms and little window-seats and low ceilings. There was the right atmosphere here. He could not help writing novels if he lived in such a place. He would be under the spell of a romantic influence, and he could get a bedroom and sitting-room in Barton Street, Westminster, for twenty-five shillings a week, including breakfast and attendance. It was absurdly, ridiculously cheap. For a man who would soon be earning his thousand a year it was almost too modest, but Oliver was not, as he said, out for extravagance. He would always live simply.

There was just one trouble. At the outset he could not be sure of earning, with unfailing regularity, the two pounds or two pounds ten which he would need for his weekly expenses. Magazine editors did not pay as promptly as their contributors might wish, and literary men were kept waiting for their money. Oliver, who had a certain shrewdness of character beneath his happy idealism and playfulness of fancy, pointed out that he would be severely handicapped at the beginning of his career if he did not have a little capital to fall back upon in case of need. He pointed this out to his father one night when they sat talking together after the other members of the family had gone to bed. For the first time during recent years Oliver opened his heart and mind to his father with candour and earnestness.

Richard Lumley, sitting back in a cane settee which cracked at every movement, was filled with a father's pride at this handsome, bright-eyed son who sat straddle-wise across a wooden chair, with his arms folded on the back of it, and his firm chin resting on his arms, while he spoke in glowing words of his ambition, his future, his certainty of success, and his intended generosity to all at home. Once or twice, as Oliver went on with his monologue, his father contrasted himself with his own boy, and in the mirror of his mind saw himself: a shabby man, older-looking than his years, with lack-lustre eyes, a thin face worn with hard work and continual anxiety to make both ends meet, and a head that was getting bald too soon, owing perhaps to that haunting fear of losing his job at Cutter & Bodger's—there were younger men pushing ahead and intriguing against him—

which had made him submissive to the rather sharp and brutal behaviour of his employers, and slavishly eager to do his duty to the uttermost detail. Once or twice a sharp pang of envy—almost of jealousy—of this boy of his, with his youth and his good looks took possession of him.

Years ago he too had had ambitions. He had desired rather more of the good things of life than were within reach of a junior clerk in the City. But the ambitions had never been fulfilled, and the good things had never come within his reach. He married too early. He had always been shabby. He had always been strugging in respectable poverty. It had crushed him and tamed him. Even his wife pitied him, and despised him a little because his spirit had been broken. He was a lonely man. Even his children kept their secrets from him, and were happier and more unrestrained in their laughter when he was shut up in his own room working out the household accounts or brooding over a book.

Richard Lumley had these thoughts, and then was ashamed of them. He followed the thread of Oliver's discourse. He warmed his chilled heart in the glow of his boy's enthusiasm. He realised, not without gladness, that Oliver wanted his father's assistance and co-operation in his literary career.

Towards the end of the talk Oliver put forward a request very plainly and simply. Would his father allow him, or rather lend him, a pound a week for a year, in order that he might take those rooms in Westminster and get into the right atmosphere? His whole career depended on that. It was essential to his success. He would pay back his father a hundredfold. He would return the loan with generous interest.

"You can always look to me for support in your old age, dad. You can look upon this pound a week as an Old Age Insurance."

He laughed in his infectious way, and the idea seemed to please him immensely. Then he rode off again on the wings of his imagination, and gave such a vivid picture of the rising splendour of the Lumley family that his father's first startled protest was silenced, and the proposed allowance seemed a petty thing compared with

the great gifts to follow. He agreed upon that pound a week, though, as he explained, it would mean working later hours to make it up in overtime, and the most stringent economy.

Oliver shook hands with his father before going to bed.

"I'm tremendously grateful to you, dad. And, look here, don't tell mother, or Horace and Galatea. Let it be our little secret. Is that a bargain?"

Mr. Lumley made it a bargain.

"God bless you, my boy," he said. "I am very proud of you."

He lay awake that night wondering how on earth he could squeeze a pound a week out of his miserable income, which was not more than enough to make both ends meet. When the clock struck three he groaned aloud, so that he woke his wife.

"What is the matter, dear?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Lumley; "I am just a trifle restless."

So Oliver Lumley left the house in Denmark Hill and went into his lodgings in Barton Street, Westminster, where the atmosphere was more congenial to his temperament.

His mother wept when he went. She twined her arms around him and clasped him as though she were losing him for ever.

On the first night of his absence his empty chair stood at the supper-table and the little maid-servant laid his place by mistake. Mrs. Lumley put her head down on the table and cried. Then she went upstairs to her bedroom and did not come down again that evening. Horace and Galatea ate their supper without speaking, and their father, after trying to maintain a monologue with artificial cheerfulness, relapsed into silence.

But in Barton Street, Westminster, Oliver was giving a supper-party to three of his friends. It cost him the best part of the first sovereign advanced by his father. But he did not begrudge the cost. He had got into his right "atmosphere" at last. For a literary man this was better than the squalor of the suburbs. His soul was free to set out upon the adventures of life.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TOUCH OF CHIVALRY

I HAVE said that Oliver Lumley was a temperamental young man. That word will dog me through this book, for it is inevitable, though inexplicable. It is his own word. Again and again throughout his career he used it of himself, complacently, proudly; in self-glory and in self-excuse; in prosperity and in adversity; in exultation and in despair.

"I am a man of temperament," he said. Let us, therefore, not quarrel with the word, but try, as far as we may, to understand it. This mysterious temperament may account for many things which otherwise would be puzzling in the life of this young man of letters. I blame it for many things in his career, I praise it for other things. There are times when we must pity the young man for being possessed by this tyrannical temperament of his. Let us look at him as established in Barton Street, Westminster (a world away, it would appear, from Rosemary Avenue, Denmark Hill), and follow some of his adventures.

Rapidly he made his way into many different phases of London society, both high and low, and, to use one of his own phrases, touched life "in many of its varied aspects." Life held out its hands to him, for his good looks and his youthful spirit won friendship and goodwill. Men much elder than himself liked to hear his laughter and to listen to his philosophy as it changed from hour to hour. Women of all classes—and he became acquainted with ladies of reputation and otherwise—could not resist the fascination of this boy if he took the trouble to put his spell upon them.

He was generally pleased to take that trouble. As a student of human nature, he was deeply interested in the heart of womanhood, whether it was hidden under the

print frock of a servant maid, the cheap blouse of a shop-girl, the sealskin jacket of a chorus girl, or the Liberty tea-gown of a lady of fashion. Often he would set out from Barton Street with the object of extending his studies in this direction, and he seldom came home without new knowledge.

Some men might walk London for a week without making acquaintance with any human soul and without a single romantic adventure. Not so Oliver. He was a striking proof of the old proverb—Adventures to the adventurous. If he went into a tobacconist's shop to buy a threepenny packet of cigarettes, he was almost certain to have an interesting encounter with the girl who served him. She would call him "silly," and giggle at the little compliment which he would drop as lightly as the match with which he had struck a light. But upon his third visit she would whisper her secrets to him over the counter, and ask for his advice or his sympathy upon intimate problems of her life. His way of saying "my dear child," the frank candour of his eyes, his really noble manner and condescending graciousness seemed to bewitch a girl like this so that she would lay bare her little heart to him. In this way he became on terms of friendship with pretty waitresses in restaurants and tea-shops, with young women who served behind the bars of taverns between Fleet Street and Piccadilly Circus, with a chorus girl of the Hilarity Theatre whose muff he had picked up as she dropped it when jumping off an omnibus; with a flower-girl outside Westminster Abbey who pinned a blossom to his coat every morning when he sauntered forth from his lodging to drink the air and study the bustle of life; with a poor girl to whom he would sometimes stand a cup of coffee at a stall when Big Ben was booming its midnight strokes; and with women in the Queer Streets of a great city, which he explored in a spirit of romance and adventure.

Scraps of conversation with these new friends he made revealed to him strange tragedies of life, and gave to him glimpses of Other Points of View (as he entitled them in his note-book) which were most valuable to him as a writer of fiction.

Take that scene when he met Daphne at the coffee-stall

by Westminster Bridge. She was hanging on the arm of a young man in evening dress who was obviously the worse for drink. The lamplight fell upon her white face with its carmine lips and big grey eyes. The wind blew a wisp of hair across her forehead. Her hat had a black feather in it, made sodden and limp by the rain which was still falling lightly. Her dress was splashed up to the waist with mud. The girl looked hungry and miserable, but she laughed with a shrill and awful gaiety as she clutched the arm of the man and said, "Well, at least you can give me a cup of coffee, can't you?"

"Get off!" said the man. He pushed her violently away from him, and she fell on her hands and knees in the mud. It was Oliver who raised her up. "My poor child," he said, "I hope you are not hurt?" The man in evening dress lurched off, stopping once or twice to look round. His hat was on the back of his head and he had the imbecile look of a drunken man.

"It is well for him that he has made off," said Oliver. He took out his pocket-handkerchief and wiped the girl's hands and some of the wet mud off her dress.

She seemed dazed, and leant up against the coffee-stall, in which a stout man stood with his elbows on the counter watching the scene stolidly.

"A cup of coffee, mister," said Oliver, and when he took it from the man he held it to the girl's lips. The first sip seemed to revive her and brought a flush of colour into her white face. She took the cup and saucer, and while she drank the steaming liquid stared at Oliver as though he were some strange and unfamiliar being.

"You've spoilt that handkerchief of yours, haven't you?" she said.

"Oh, that's nothing. . . . What a brute that fellow was!"

"They're all brutes," said the girl, putting down her cup with a clatter. "All bad, but some are worse than others." She thought for a moment, pressing her hand to her temples.

"If I were to meet a good man, I would go down on my knees in the mud to him, and then ask him to scrag me."

"I am pretty good myself," said Oliver. "Not so

bad. But I don't want to spoil another handkerchief, and I certainly shan't scrag you."

"*You're* not good, are you?" said the girl. She put a hand on his arm, and stared up into his face. Their eyes looked into each other closely. She breathed heavily, and then gave a miserable laugh.

"Oh, I expect you're like the rest of them. . . . Are you coming home?"

"I'll see you home," said Oliver. "Where do you live?"

"Turncoat Street. It's not far from here."

She put her arm through his, and leant her head against his shoulder. Oliver held his umbrella over her, for the rain was falling heavily now. As they walked he questioned her about her life and her people. She told him that her name was Daphne, that her life was hell, and that her people were devils. Her father and brother were "professional" gentlemen. They had chucked her because she was too well known to the "narks." She had done a bit of time herself. All things considering, prison was better than the streets.

"My poor little one!" said Oliver. "To think that you might have been a good wife and mother!"

The remark was rather commonplace in the circumstances, but it startled the girl Daphne as though he had hit her. She dropped his arm and looked at him with a stare of surprise.

"Strike me!" she said. "You're not a parson, are you?"

"Good heavens no!" said Oliver. "What makes you think that?"

"Well, you do talk like one of them save-your-soul fellows."

Then she made a confession.

"Not but what I don't like a little bit of religion now and again. I have got a few texts round the walls. You'll see them when you come in. I bought them for tuppence in a second-hand bookstall down Farringdon Road."

She gave a shrill laugh, as though tickled by the sharp ironies of life.

"Strange!" said Oliver. "Even you have not lost

all your spirituality, little one. Poor child of the streets!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Daphne. "Spirituality! I don't think!"

They turned down a narrow alley, where lights blinked through the broken window-panes and tattered blinds of some dilapidated houses. A woman's shriek pierced the silence.

"What's that?" said Oliver.

"Nothing to fret about. You hear lots of queer noises down this street. Nobody bothers."

The girl stopped before a low doorway and fumbled in her frock for a latchkey.

"Well, good-bye!" said Oliver. "I am glad to have seen you home."

"What! Aren't you coming in?"

The girl's grey eyes grew big with amazement.

"No; of course not!"

He took her hand and put it to his lips.

"I have a reverence for all poor women; for the little flower of love that is in every woman's heart."

She pulled her hand away, as though he had stung it with the touch of his lips.

"What are you playing at?" she said hoarsely. "I'm not a good woman. I'm a bit of dirt."

"No. You are unfortunate, that is all. In another position of life you would have been a good woman. Good night, my poor Daphne!"

The girl was leaning back against the door.

"Oh, God!" she cried, and laughed and laughed hysterically.

Oliver strode away, and the shrill laughter thrilled in his ears until he turned the corner into the Westminster Bridge Road. He had a warm glow about the heart. He felt that he had behaved with chivalry and nobility. He was pleased with himself. He remembered that phrase of his, "I reverence the little flower of love that is in every woman's heart." He stopped under the lamp-post and made a note of it. "Rather pretty!" he said.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE LADY BOUNTIFUL

The adventure with Daphne suggested an idea for a short story, which he called "Flower o' the Mud." He wrote it tenderly, and it was accepted in *The Magazine of Fiction*. The editor sent a note of congratulation, and asked to see more of his work. Daphne had paid for her cup of coffee.

He received another letter, which pleased him even more than the one from the editor. It was such a genuine and tender tribute of admiration from a stranger. It was written on hand-woven paper, from which as he opened the envelope there stole out the faint fragrance of violets. "A lady!" said Oliver, and his instinct was right. In a very firm and delicate handwriting were the words that follow:

*Dear Sir,*

*Will you forgive me—a stranger—for writing a few lines to tell you how deeply I have been touched by your story, "Flower o' the Mud"? I live here in a quiet village where there is but little poverty, and where I think the loveliness of Nature (so generous in its beauty!) keeps our hearts free from the basest passions and the most violent temptations of life. Even here we have our tragedies, and the human heart is always frail, but we are sheltered from all those terrible dangers which beset the path of young men and women in a great city. I myself live a rather cloistered life (an old English garden keeps my hands busy and my heart glad), but sometimes I reproach myself for enjoying that comfortable peace which is denied to those who toil so hard in the midst of noise and in the depths of squalor. Your story of that little human flower blossoming in the mud of evil things made me weep for all that such poor girls have to suffer on their way through the world.*

*It is wonderful to me to think that a man should have such a delicate understanding of a woman's heart, and should write her story with such tenderness and sympathy. This is the first letter I have ever written to an author who is unknown to me, and I hope very much you will forgive this intrusion.*

*I am,*
*Yours truly,*
*Virginia Garland.*

*P.S.—I enclose a cheque for £10, in the hope that you may see your way to use it for the relief of deserving cases among the outcasts of London whom you may know as a student of London life. If that is troubling you too much, kindly sent it to the Hospital for Women.*

*V.G.*

*The Rookery,*
*Windlesham,*
*Worcestershire.*

Oliver Lumley read this letter several times, with a glowing sense of pleasure and pride. It was the first time the lady had written to an author, she said, and it was the first time that Oliver Lumley, author, had received a letter from one of his readers. It was a sign of his increasing fame. It was proof that he could write living words to stir the hearts of men and women.

He repeated the name of his correspondent. "Virginia Garland—how charming and fragrant!" In his imagination he conjured up the picture of his admirer—it was a picture of a beautiful girl of twenty-five or so, with brown hair and an oval face with dark, luminous eyes. She wore a big straw hat with roses in it, and a white dress. She was sitting on the terrace of a noble garden with a bouquet of flowers on her lap and *The Magazine of Fiction* on a little stool by her side. It was open at the page where his own story was printed, "'Flower o' the Mud,' by Oliver Lumley."

A charming picture! He was almost in love with it. Then he fingered the cheque drawn upon the London and County Bank. Ten pounds! At that moment he had two shillings and sevenpence halfpenny in his pocket.

The cheque was made out in his name, and he could do what he liked with it in charity. Here was an opportunity for playing the good fairy.

He sat down in his small room in Barton Street and, clearing a place among the breakfast things, which had not yet been taken away, as Big Ben boomed out the stroke of noon (he had been late overnight and was still in his blue silk dressing-gown), he wrote an enthusiastic letter of thanks to "Virginia Garland."

He told her something of his own ideals and aspirations as a literary man, and as a student of human nature. He told her how glad he would be to get away to the flower fields and the peace of the country from the squalor and roar and tragedy of London, the modern Babylon, but how his duty held him to his world of bricks and mortar.

"I accept your beautiful gift," he wrote, "on behalf of those poor children of life who dwell with poverty. I will use it to the best advantage, and in their rough and simple way they will bless your name."

There was a moisture in his eyes when he had sealed the envelope. He was stirred with generous emotion. He addressed the letter to Miss Virginia Garland, after a moment's hesitation as to the "Miss." But he was certain she was not a married woman.

After completing his toilet he had a short interview with his landlady, who pressed for the rent, which was three weeks overdue. With a little good-natured pleasantry it was easy to persuade her to wait awhile. Then he cleaned his patent-leather boots with his own hands in the kitchen, where Bessie the maidservant was making a roly-poly pudding (he kissed her bare arm, which looked so pretty as it was powdered with the white flour up to her dimpled elbow!) and afterwards went out to the post. Thence he took a "taxi" to the London and County Bank, where he cashed the cheque, and paid for the cab out of a pound in silver.

A little while later Oliver met Sally Stiff, the flower-girl who provided him with his morning button-hole. She had her carnation ready for him, and said, "Look 'ere, young man, I ain't a-going to give you sich long credit. You owe me for a week already, and though

you do say sich pretty things abaht me brahn 'air an' coral teeth, I'm not in business for the love of the thing. See ? "

"My dear Sally," said Oliver, "is there any little thing you want just now ? Have you set your mind on any small treasure ? "

The girl laughed, and showed those remarkably white teeth to which Oliver had paid a compliment one day. Some passers-by turned to look at the girl with the ruddy face and loose brown hair, who stood with her hand on her broad hip and a basket of flowers slung from her shoulder. They wondered why she was "cheeking" the young swell who was talking to her.

"Hush ! I'm quite serious ! "

"Gar'n ! " said Sally Stiff.

Oliver said that it was a case of honour bright. He showed her as proof a new half-sovereign.

"Look here, I'm going to make you a present of that. Have you got a poor old mother at home, or an invalid sister ? It will do them a bit of good."

"Pore old muvver ? Lor' lumme, she's been in the Jug these three years past for bashing pore old farver ! "

The girl laughed with shrill amusement.

"Invalid sister, did yer siy ? No blooming fear. There's nothing the matter with *our* 'ealth. A bit of rope 'as made the quickest death in our family ! "

"Well, anyhow, you are one of the poor children of the great city," said Oliver, somewhat disheartened. "Buy yourself some nice warm things with this."

The girl took the half-sovereign, and bit it with her nice white teeth.

"It's a good un ! . . . My word, it would buy me a bloomin' fine 'at with fevvers, wouldn't it jest ! That would knock Alf a bit ! "

She stared at the bit of gold in her big red hand. Then she turned on Oliver as fiercely as a young tigress.

"'Oo're yer getting at ? What's yer gime ? "

"Hush ! " said Oliver. "I've got no game. I want nothing back—except one or two carnations. Have you got a pin ? "

He picked out one of her flowers and put it into his coat.

"That's a fair bargain. Put it on, Sally."

The girl obeyed with trembling hands.

"I siy. I didn't know you was one of them millionaire blokes. Strike me pink! 'Arf a shiner!"

"I'm not rich. I'm as poor as a church mouse. But this is a gift from a fairy godmother."

Oliver Lumley went on his way with the joyous feeling of having done a charitable deed.

"Thank Heaven," he said, "I was born with a good heart."

## CHAPTER VII

### THE PRICE OF A MEAL

OLIVER showed the excellence of his heart by the way in which he distributed the other part of the ten pounds from Virginia Garland. He treated Miss Livvy O'Brien and one of her girl friends to a charming though modest luncheon at Michel's in Soho.

Livvy was the young chorus lady whose muff Oliver had picked up as she jumped off a bus opposite the Hilarity Theatre. Oliver had made good friends with her, and once or twice had visited her lodgings in the Kennington Road—it was awkwardly near his own home in Denmark Hill—where she had introduced him to other young women of the profession and to young actors who dropped in to take tea with her. Livvy acted musical comedy in summer and pantomime in winter (she had had a speaking part in "Jack and the Beanstalk"), and out of her twenty-five shillings a week she helped her parents, who lived in Dublin. So, at least, she said; and as she was an Irish girl there was no reason to doubt her.

Oliver considered that he was fully justified in regarding her as a "deserving case" according to the terms of Virginia Garland's bequest. He also extended the principle to the girl friend, Doris Fortescue.

"The poor girls do not have much brightness in their lives," he said to himself. "They certainly are outcasts. It will be the best of charity to give them a little good cheer for once in their lives."

He cheered them up remarkably well, and indeed no one would have imagined that either Livvy or Doris were outcasts in a world of misery. Livvy was in the highest spirits when Oliver fetched her from the theatre after a rehearsal and sat between her and Doris in a hansom cab, on the way to Michel's.

"Isn't he the dearest boy out of Dublin?" she said

to her friend, and, putting her arm through his, pressed her rosy face against his shoulder, leaving there a faint mark of pearl powder.

Doris took Oliver's other arm, and said that he was an angel in disguise and quite the nicest thing she had ever met in a bowler hat.

The luncheon-party was a complete success, but rather more expensive than Oliver had reckoned. When he said "What are you girls going to drink—lemonade, I suppose?" Doris sang a little song which had the refrain of "Catch me! Catch me! Catch me!" and said, "I fancy a little bottle of port; don't you, Livvy? It will warm up the cockles of our hearts after the draughts in that filthy theatre." Livy said that any old thing was good enough for her, but she did not object to port. So port it was, paid for by Virginia Garland's charity.

Undoubtedly it did warm up the cockles of their hearts, for with rather flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes they laughed with the most silvery ripple at every jest of Oliver's, told a number of amusing theatrical stories, and over the cigarettes and coffee indulged in confidences about their adventures on tour, which revealed a good deal of human nature to a young man in quest of knowledge.

Livvy sat next to Oliver and fondled his hand every time she laid down her fork, which was not so often, for she had a hearty young appetite. Even after a five-course meal she suggested, with an exaggerated brogue, that "sure an' she would be plased if the darlingest boy would jump to a box of chockies for the sweetest little rosebuds that bloomed in the Strand." Oliver "jumped," and in less than fifteen minutes Livvy and Doris had consumed chocolates to the amount of three and six-pence. He took them back to the theatre in a cab, and they thanked him for the treat he had given them.

"You have behaved like a perfect gentleman," said Livvy. She put her head on one side and eyed him roguishly. "Like a musical comedy gentleman," she added with a final ripple of laughter, and then with a swish of her skirts she sped through the stage door.

The luncheon cost Oliver Lumley two pounds and a few shillings. "And extremely cheap, too!" was his reflection when he added up the items of that remarkable meal.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MEN OF THE EMPIRE

THE expenditure of what remained of Virginia Garland's bounty—amounting to seven pounds or so—may not be set down in detail, for Oliver was not a man of accounts, but a man of letters. A good deal of it was dispensed at the Wastrel Club in the form of whiskies-and-sodas to fellows who were down on their luck, and so poor that they could not refresh their rather painful thirst until some other member, more blessed with this world's goods than they, took pity on them, and said, "Have a drink, old man?" Oliver Lumley felt it to be a very noble privilege to take the lead in this matter, and, though the youngest member of the club, to act in some degree as the Master of Ceremonies.

It was the more delightful to him because these men were intellectual Bohemians, and among them were the leaders of thought in England, the cream of London's literary and artistic life, and the members of that inmost circle which had seemed so far away, so glorious, and so exclusive when Oliver was beginning his new career in Rosemary Avenue, Denmark Hill. It was, of course, of immense value, socially and professionally, to Oliver, that he should enter this circle, and be on terms of equality with brothers of his craft.

He owed this privilege to an old schoolfellow of his with whom he had renewed friendship after a meeting in the lounge of the Empire. There it was one night that Oliver was tapped on the shoulder, and turning round heard a voice say—"Roly—or I'll eat my hat!" It was a crush hat, and the face underneath was familiar to Oliver in a reminiscent way.

"Why, it is Kiss-me-Hardy! . . . my dear old chap!"

The two men clasped hands.

"You are looking awfully fit!"

"We have both changed a lot. How many years ago is it? Seven, by Jove!"

Charles Hardy was a tall young man in rather shabby evening clothes and a crumpled shirt-front. He stood six feet high, with broad shoulders and a good chest. He was too stout for his age, but had a big boyish face, with eyes as blue as forget-me-nots, and a fine head of fair hair cropped pretty close, but with crisp curls. He was a typical actor, by the look of him, the sort of man who would bring the house down as the hero of a Drury Lane melodrama, clasping the little heroine to his broad bosom with the limelight on his upturned face and in the whites of his eyes. His looks belied him. Oliver discovered afterwards he was a journalist on a half-penny paper, where he had gained an immense reputation and a fair salary as a "sob-merchant." That is to say, he supplied the sentiment.

With his blue eyes and a sunny smile he looked at Oliver from head to foot, and then gave him an approving word.

"You've improved, my lad. Quite a blood—what?" He glanced over to the stage, where a girl in a thin garment was capering before a ghastly head. "Infernal nonsense! Let's get out of this. Come round to the Wastrels."

"Who are they?" asked Oliver.

Hardy made his blue eyes bigger.

"Don't know the Wastrels? Well, you've a lot to learn!"

Oliver was abashed. He blushed and stammered out that he had heard of them somewhere. He was annoyed to think that he should appear so suburban to this old schoolfellow, who had all the air of a man of the town.

"Will you have anything?" he said, to cover his confusion, and Hardy replied, "Why not?" in his genial, careless way.

Two whiskies and a split soda were provided out of Virginia Garland's bounty. Then Hardy led the way out of the theatre and hailed a taxicab. On the way he questioned Oliver as to his business in life, and laughed heartily when he heard of his literary ambitions.

"Poor devil!" he cried. "Take my advice and

become a commercial traveller. You'll make more money, old man."

On leaving the cab he put his hand in his pocket and jingled some coins. But Oliver was beforehand with him. "This is mine," he said; and Hardy gave him a sunny smile and said, "just as you like, my child."

That was Oliver's first night at the Wastrels, and he had a merry time in the heart of modern Bohemia.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE BOHEMIANS

THE place was a barely furnished suite of rooms on the first floor of a house on the outskirts of Soho, and its walls were plastered from floor to ceiling with outrageous caricatures of the club-members, distorted out of all human likeness, yet suggestive in a diabolical way of the frailties, follies, and vanities of human character. It seemed as if the artist had given impressionistic studies of the souls of his victims seen by jaundiced eyes.

"Extraordinary!" said Oliver, staring at them.

"Yes, devilish clever, aren't they?" said Hardy. "That fellow would go far, if the English fool-public had any sense of art. Which they haven't."

He took Oliver's coat and hung it on a peg.

"I'll introduce you to some of the boys," he said. "Bright-looking lot, don't you think?"

"Who are they?" asked Oliver, with humility. "I ought to know them, I suppose. But I have only just begun to live."

"Oh, you'll see Life here, my boy! With a big L. We're all famous people in the Wastrels. The public ignores us, but we admire each other—tremendously and industriously. See that fellow with the tousled hair that has never seen a brush these ten years, and coffee stains down his shirt-front? That's Rowland Higgs."

"Who's he?" said Oliver.

"Good Lord!"

Hardy appeared to be shocked to his inmost soul, and then chuckled deliciously, as though he liked the sensation.

"Don't know Rowland Higgs? Why, he's the celebrated poet, writes decadent verse in *The Academy*. Has produced three morbid plays at the Stage Society. Reviews novels and children's books, by way of earning a living. He's one of our big guns, I can tell you. We always put him up on one of our 'nights' to recite

' Our Last Ride Together '—Longfellow's or Swinburne's or somebody's—and he always forgets the words, and we all clap and say ' Dashed good, old fellow ; you ought to be with Beerbohm Tree.' "

Hardy glanced round the room to pick out other notabilities, and found them easily.

" There's Braintree Smith, editor of *The Social Guide*. Takes tea regularly with the Countess of Nottingham, and knows all the scandal of society. Does the social notes in *The Crown* and lives on Tulse Hill. . . . And there's Winwood Barnes, the dramatic critic. I can see he has had five first nights this week by the state of his shirt. . . . That tired-looking young man with reddish hair and white-moused eyes is Douglas Vernon, who writes those historical novels full of sword-play and romantic adventure. Cribs Dumas all the time, and in the opinion of his friends on the literary pages of the Press is better than his master. You *must* have seen his stuff on the bookstalls ? It is read by every typist girl in London."

Hardy seemed to be enjoying himself. His eyes roved round the room, and at every glance he gave a life-history of a man of fame, of whom Oliver Lumley had never heard. Among them were painters, drawing-room entertainers, novelists, essayists, critics, black-and-white artists, two or three barristers, and several journalists.

" You can always tell a journalist," said Hardy, " because he always makes himself the central figure of his anecdotes and talks with an air of authority upon every subject under the sun, revealing his childlike ignorance in every sentence. I ought to know, because I am a journalist myself with the same tricks. . . . But look here, I must not fail to introduce you to old Ballantyne. He's our show-piece. We keep him in free drinks, with occasional free grub (though the old fellow can go for a week without eating), and have a subscription once every five years to buy him a new suit of clothes in order that he may be within the regulations of decency as laid down by the Metropolitan Police. Ballantyne has *made* this club. He gives it all its glamour. He brings American visitors to the Wastrel ' nights.' He has bolstered up our reputation as a haunt of Bohemians.

For there is no denying that he is the last of the Bohemians. Forty years ago he played Shakespearian clowns in the provinces, once, according to tradition, he played Hamlet at the old Surrey. Since then he has not done a stroke of work, but lives on a sardonic and poisonous humour, upon stories of old-time actors, and upon the bounty of literary hangers-on who get into touch with Bohemianism by lending him half-crowns, standing him whiskies, and listening with winks and nods and chuckles to his oft-told yarns. Without old Ballantyne the Wastrels wouldn't exist. Understand ? "

Oliver did not understand very clearly, because he suspected his friend of indulging in satire, and because he felt a thrill of pride at arriving at last in one of the inner haunts of the true Bohemianism.

" Halloa ! " said Hardy, " there's old Burdon. That's good. I'll put you on to him for a start. It'll save me a lot of trouble and do you a bit of good."

He steered a straight course to an elderly man with a frock-coat tucked over his knees, a stiff white waistcoat over a somewhat portly stomach, which formed a good background for a massive gold chain with seals, and, among other characteristics of elderly respectability, a bald head which glistened like a china globe under the electric light.

" Room at your table, young fellow ? " asked Hardy, in his delightfully easy way. " Here's a nice youth whom I want to introduce to you. Oliver Lumley—a rising star in the spacious heavens of literature, don't you know ? That is to say, he has written for *The Police Budget.*"

" My dear young sir," said Mr. Burdon, rising, and grasping Oliver by the hand warmly. " I am delighted, delighted. Any man of letters may command me for a whisky, or two, or three. Sit down, Mr. Lumley. Join the boys. We are *sans cérémonie* in the Wastrels. All Bohemians here, you know ! "

" It is very kind of you ! " said Oliver, and he was genuinely moved by his warm welcome. He sat down between two young men with extremely pallid faces and rather long hair, who were sipping glasses of whisky silently and thoughtfully. They were introduced to

Oliver as Mr. Bingham and Mr. Shawcross, the well-known dramatists.

On the other side of the table was a man who might have been anything between thirty-five and seventy-five, with a clean-shaven face, a heavy jaw, and hard-boiled eyes. He wore an old-fashioned stock and dog's-eared collar, and among other details of his costume was a pair of immaculate patent boots with cloth uppers. He sat over a very large tankard of beer, which he held firmly in one big hand, and when he spoke, which was seldom, it was in a hoarse voice, like a coster who had been crying his wares, and when he winked, which was often, it convulsed the whole side of his face.

Mr. Burdon introduced him by the name of Gilbert Verney, "the celebrated barrister." It was then that the gentleman gave the first of his cataclysmic winks, and said in his hoarse voice, "What-o!"

On the other side of him was an older man with a mass of red hair, and a long, lean face, with melancholy blue eyes which matched his flowing tie. He wore a Norfolk jacket, Harris tweed trousers very baggy at the knees, and big brown boots.

"Our humorist, Jack Rafferty," said Mr. Burdon, by way of introduction.

Mr. Burdon himself was magnificent. He talked continuously in the greatest good humour, and told a number of anecdotes of a somewhat old and full-flavoured kind. These he always prefaced by the same words: "By the way, boys, have I told you that little story about . . ." so and so.

The answer was always the same: "No, go on, old man! Let's have it."

This was from Gilbert Verney, the old, or young, gentleman with the stock and the dog's-eared collar, who then gave a hoarse chuckle, and one of his vast winks.

"A good story is like old wine. You can't have too much of it."

This was from Jack Rafferty, "our humorist," as he was called, who then sighed deeply, and stared across the room through the tobacco smoke with wistful melancholy eyes, until he was slapped on the back by Mr. Burdon, who called him a devilish droll dog.

"I am sure it will be fresh to me," said Mr. Bingham, one of the celebrated dramatists.

"I'm listening," said Mr. Shawcross, the other celebrated dramatist.

"Well, then, if you *will* have it," said Mr. Burdon, launching forth into a narrative of which the conclusion was too obvious at the beginning.

"Devilish good, old buck!" said Gilbert Verney, turning stiffly round in his chair to wink at Oliver with immense solemnity. "And as fresh as a daisy. But who said drinks?"

"God bless my soul!" cried Mr. Burdon. "Forgive me, boys. Waiter!"

And the waiter was commanded to bring more beer for Mr. Verney—"In a tankard," said Mr. Verney—and more whisky for the other gentlemen.

It was astonishing to see the amount of liquid refreshment ordered by Mr. Burdon and put down to his account by the waiter. Friendly hands would press him on the shoulder, and friendly voices say, "Dear old boy, in fine form as usual, eh?" And Mr. Burdon would look round, with a delighted laugh, and say, "My dear lad, how are you? But you've got nothing to drink! What shall it be?"

"Oh, a drop of Scotch," or "a green Chartreuse," or "a small Bass, old man," were the cheerful replies of the friendly voices.

Oliver Lumley was overawed by this prodigal generosity. He wondered who this bland and benevolent old gentleman might be. Probably, he thought, the editor of *The Times*, or an actor-manager of importance and wealth. Yes, looking at the white shirt-front and the massive gold chain, he decided upon the actor-manager.

An improvised entertainment was in progress in the room, for it was a Wastrel "night." Old Balantyne—"dear old Balantyne," said Mr. Burdon—was called for by long and repeated shouts. He turned deaf ears to them for several minutes, and sat scowling in a seat nearest to the fire, plucking at his long iron-grey locks, or passing his long, bony hands over his sharp, gaunt knees. Then he rose and took his stand by the fireside, and in a deep, sepulchral voice, said, "The Gravediggers' Scene from Hamlet."

Tremendous applause followed this announcement, and at the fag-end of it Mr. Burdon leant over to Oliver and whispered in his ear: "An actor of the old school, my lad! We don't breed them now. . . . I've heard him do it a hundred times, and it is always inimitable."

Ballantyne declaimed the old familiar lines. At times it seemed as if the wind whistled through his toothless gums. At times his sepulchral voice broke into a childish treble. His lean, grey face was twisted into strange and hideous contortions. His words were as indistinct as Irving's in his most inarticulate moments. But at the conclusion, when he thrust back his iron-grey locks and bowed with grave dignity to the company, tremendous enthusiasm applauded him.

"What do you think of *that*?" asked Mr. Burdon of Oliver, and without waiting for an answer said: "Magnificent. The old school! The old school!"

Gilbert Verney turned his hard-boiled eyes to Oliver, and Oliver had learned by this time to expect the prodigious wink which followed.

"Gives one a bit of a twist," said Mr. Gilbert Verney, staring into his empty tankard.

And Mr. Burdon said: "My dear old boy, forgive me! Waiter! More beer for Mr. Verney."

"In a tankard," said Gilbert Verney.

Other gentlemen followed with songs, recitations, and anecdotes. They were given chiefly by elder members of the club, several of whom wore frock-coats. Tremendous enthusiasm followed every performance, though it was evident from Mr. Burdon's remarks, and from the behaviour of the company, that they were familiar of old with every item on the impromptu programme. They called the names of the songs, and sang the choruses. They knew the end of each anecdote before it had been told, and laughed uproariously before the point had been reached. They prompted with lines of recitations when the reciter forgot his words.

"Dear old Robinson," said Mr. Burdon. "He has told that story on every Wastrel 'night' for the last fifteen years. And it is better every time."

Only one man's song was received with coldness and lack of applause.

"That's something new, isn't it?" asked Mr. Burdon. "It's poor trash, and rather bad form, don't you think? The Wastrels are not to be fudged off with things that have not had the hall-mark of their approval."

"I agree," said Mr. Jack Rafferty, the humorist. "We don't want new wine in old bottles."

Mr. Burdon laughed noisily.

"We can always rely on old Jack Rafferty for an epigram." He turned to Oliver Lumley. "Devilish droll dog, isn't he? He's our humorist, you know."

Oliver laughed also; but he wondered where the joke was, or where the epigram. It bothered him a good deal in bed that night.

At the conclusion of the entertainment the Wastrels seemed suddenly to go mad all together, and by general consent.

"The Wastrels' Band!" cried Mr. Burdon, laughing until the tears came into his eyes. He seized a plate and a spoon, and used them as drum and drumstick, while he marched round the room in a procession of club-members playing strange and awful music on instruments of a curious kind.

Mr. Gilbert Verney used a pewter tankard as a gong, upon which he rapped with his latch-key. An old gentleman with silvery locks and a refined old face was banging away at a tea-tray. The fire-tongs, the shovel and poker, newspapers rolled into the form of trumpets, a comb and tissue paper, a penny whistle produced from the frock-coat of a respectable middle-aged man with side-whiskers, a violin, on which one of the club members had played Mascagni's "Intermezzo," provided instruments for other performers, and with a wild hullabaloo, a terrific din and discord, yells, cat-calls and snatches of song the Wastrels proceeded round and round the table, with queer, freakish, grotesque steps, like a cake-walk in a lunatic asylum.

Oliver had a German beer jug, with which he contrived to make a good deal of noise by snapping the lid up and down. His head was in a whirl. His pulse was beating fast. His blood was all a-tingle. This was Life! This was the folly of Youth! . . . It was magnificent, anyhow, although as regards youthfulness he was surprised

at the number of middle-aged men who took part in the mad merriment.

Mr. Burdon returned to the table mopping his forehead. "Oh, Bohemia!" he said. "Bohemia! Gay, mad, dissolute old Bohemia!"

He asked if any of the boys would like a drink. Many of them accepted the proposal.

"Dry work!" said Gilbert Verney. "Where's the beer?"

"Waiter, more beer for Mr. Verney," said Mr. Burdon.

"In a tankard," said Gilbert Verney.

The clock was striking twelve. The tinkling bell seemed to have a magical effect upon the company. Young men gulped down their liquid hurriedly. Old men, whose eyes were rather watery now, tilted their glasses with a haste which caused some of them to spill a little whisky down their shirt-fronts.

"Well, the last train for Tooting waits for no man!" said Mr. Jack Rafferty, the humorist. "And the wife's waiting for me at the other end of the line!"

Mr. Burdon chuckled, grasped his hand warmly, and slapped him on the back.

"Witty to the last!" he said, laughing. "You'll die with a jest on your lips, old boy. . . . Gay old dog!"

"The twelve-ten to Brixton, my lad," said Mr. Shawcross, the celebrated dramatist, to Mr. Bingham, the other celebrated dramatist.

"Can we do it?" said Mr. Bingham anxiously. "Alice will be waiting up for me."

"I'm for Wimbledon," said Gilbert Verney. He gave one of his hoarse chuckles, and Oliver just dodged his curious wink. "A far cry from Bohemia! But much better air out of town."

There was a general exodus from the club, and respectable, middle-aged gentlemen suddenly remembered "the wife" while some of them also remembered with alarm that they had forgotten to take the latch-key.

"Well, back to the little suburban home," said one of the club members.

Mr. Burdon shook both of Oliver's hands.

"Delighted to have met you. Delighted. I am always glad of brilliant conversation. It is a mental pick-me-up, a moral tonic. You must join the Wastrels,

Mr. Lumley, sir. A young literary man like yourself—Bohemia, you know. Let me nominate you."

"I should be most honoured," said Oliver. "But as yet I am only a novice. I am serving my apprenticeship."

Mr. Burdon waved his doubts away.

"You are a literary man. That is enough. . . . Personally, I regret to say, I am not a professional man of letters, only a connoisseur and patron, as they would have said in the old days. The fact is . . ." he lowered his voice, and squeezed Oliver's arm in a confidential way—"I keep a hat-shop in the City, 303, Cheapside; Home address, 22, Primrose Villas, Dulwich. If you need a new hat I always give discount to the Wastrels."

He became more confidential.

"I like to come here with the boys. Dear lads! dear, gay-hearted, irresponsible Bohemian lads! As you have seen, I am somewhat of a raconteur. They like my stories. It is pleasant to get away from Dulwich into this wild Bohemian haunt. It brings back the spirit of immortal youth."

He put his hand on his white waistcoat in the direction of his heart, and gazed round the room with moist eyes, sniffing a little at the stale tobacco smoke and the fumes of the whisky dregs.

"Ah!" he said. "Bohemia!"

He grasped Oliver by the hand.

"I must hurry away, my dear lad. The wife always stays up to warm a basin of broth for me."

Only a few men remained in the club. One of them was the old man Ballantyne, whose lean, withered face looked like a death-mask as he sat over the last embers of the club fire. He was telling some rather terrible stories of vicious humour to three or four young men, who burst out into shrill laughter.

Oliver looked round for Hardy, his old school chum, but he had gone hours before. Then Oliver went out into the street, glad to feel the fresh night air in his face. His eyes and lips and palate were smoke-dried. He had a bad headache. But he had seen behind the hidden veil of modern Bohemia, and he felt that he had gone a step forward in his career. His only regret was that so many of those Bohemians lived in the suburbs.

## CHAPTER X

### A LETTER TO A LADY

*My dear Miss Virginia Garland,* (the letter was from Oliver Lumley),

*Your name has a beautiful fragrance to me—if you will allow me to say so—and sometimes in city streets the memory of it comes to me like a breath of sweet country air. To-day this fragrance is really present to my senses, for I have upon my desk now as I write, above a litter of manuscripts (I confess that as a man of letters I am hopelessly untidy!) a cheap vase containing those flowers—the hollyhocks and sweetwilliams—which you have sent me from your garden. That was like the Lady Bountiful you are. It is very comforting to me, very encouraging (believe me) to know that while I toil in town, weaving plots, getting deep into the throbbing turmoil of humanity, exploring this great, and wonderful, and squalid city in the quest for Truth (for that, after all, is the vacation of the literary man,) that far away in the country is a lady, unknown to me except by name and sympathy, who sometimes, in her quiet garden and among her blossoms, sends a thought to the man who has no quietude, and no flower-garden save that of the imagination.*

*But you have sent more than a thought—little gifts, tangible and practical, and full of power and charity. For your last five pounds I thank you most sincerely, on behalf of those luckless ones among whom I have distributed it, in your name, as* largesse *in their misery. Shall I give an account of my stewardship? That would weary you. But be assured that it has given new hope, a little joy, good relief, to several poor souls "down on their luck," as they say.*

*You write that you cannot understand the miracle of that imaginative and creative gift which belongs to the*

*novelist. You envy it. No. It is not to be envied. The literary temperament is a miserable heritage. Sometimes I could pray most earnestly that it should be lifted from me, and that I should become one of those ordinary men who go on their quiet, plodding way with good-humour and content, without that self-analysis, that quivering sensibility, those haunting, unsatisfied desires, which torture the artist.*

*Shall I tell you some of my secrets—the secrets of a literary man? We do not know each other, except in correspondence, so that the confession is not dangerous! (I write jestingly!) Shall I tell you of the agonies of that creative gift which you so envy? You think it is a natural gift which flows easily. All artists would deny that. Creation, whether in painting, music, or literature, is always painful. Believe me, I sit down for hours before blank paper, wrestling, as it were, with my own inner consciousness, in the hope that suddenly out of nothingness there will appear an idea —a situation—a plot. A hundred vague and shadowy forms, the unborn, embryo creatures of imagination, float through my brain. The echoes of our great throbbing human life come with faint, formless harmonies to my senses. The beginnings of stories, the ends of stories, the tangled threads, or ragged ends of human dramas, tease me on with the expectation of arranging themselves into clear-cut, definite, orderly motives for a narrative. Then suddenly I find my nerves are quivering, my head hot, my heart sickened with these vain intellectual efforts. I have smoked too much (an evil habit, though sometimes it soothes the senses, and concentrates the mind), and I plunge out into the fresh air, into the busy streets. At home on my desk the paper is still blank! And always there is the haunting thought to a poor literary man—I am sometimes proud of my poverty, and sometimes afraid of it—that he must write a story or go without a meal; that he must write something new somehow, to pay his bills, that he must create or starve!*

*The tragedy of it is that his temperament demands things unnecessary to the ordinary man. He needs a continual change of environment, of scenery, and of society. Otherwise he rusts, and his imagination is limited by the commonplace. He needs beauty—though he lives perhaps in squalor. His poverty is not that stimulus which it has*

*been called by comfortable folk. It often degrades him, drags him down, stifles him, destroys him. He is tempted to work down to the level of what the public will buy, rather than strive for the high summits of his ideals. Editors—the merchants of Literature—are in conspiracy against his idealism, and he is tempted by the devil. Tempted also by the beautiful fairies of life. I confess to you, dear Lady Bountiful, that I love and desire the beautiful things of this world—beautiful pictures, beautiful furniture (does not Ruskin say that the imagination is brutalised by living with ugly things?), beautiful dresses, music, paintings, and scenery. Occasionally I get glimpses of these things, for I have the privilege of going at times among people who possess them. (As a gentleman I am not denied pleasant society, though as a literary man I am poverty-stricken!)—but always I have to return to this wretched lodging and its gimcrack furniture, and its slatternly landlady—dear soul that she is!*

*Why do I tell you these things? Because, though we have never met (do you never come to town?) I know that you will sympathise, and perhaps understand. Forgive me if I have been too candid in self-revelation.*

*Yours always sincerely,*
*Oliver Lumley.*

*P.S.—Yes, George Herbert's poems are very beautiful. I send you in return my latest story. A little trifle, but with an underlying meaning.*

## CHAPTER XI

### THE OLD HOME

It will be seen that our young friend Oliver continued his correspondence (and took pains with the style of it) with the lady who had written to him from the country. It will be noticed also that she had followed her first gift by another, on behalf of those suffering people whom as an author he came to know in the queer streets of life. It is, I think, to Oliver's credit that he built up a rather beautiful picture in his imagination of this rural benefactress. One or two phrases in his letter to her may have a ring of insincerity, but that is because a literary man's letter, written with a touch of what we call "style," always seems slightly false to people of this day, whose letter-writing is more slovenly and colloquial. I defend the character of Oliver by saying that he was perfectly sincere in his gratitude and in his devotion. He told the plain truth when he said that often as he went about in London the vision of a beautiful face and the memory of a charming name—Virginia Garland's—haunted him. In his imaginative way he made a little idyll about her in his heart. She was his dream-lady, vague and mystical, whom he worshipped as young Dante his Beatrice, who was not more familiar in the flesh. Yet, though he made a little shrine for her in his heart, he was not precluded from intercourse of a more human kind with other women.

To return to his letter. I call attention to that phrase in which he says that he will not give an account of his stewardship regarding the lady's second contribution to the Oliver Lumley Charity Funds. Personally, I do not think he was called upon to present a debit or credit account, with items nicely set down and balanced, as though he were a chartered accountant. On the other hand, I fancy his conscience glided too easily to one of the

proverbs which the devil has made to trap the souls of men. "Charity begins at home," said Oliver when he fingered that crisp five-pound note, and reflecting that his father was an overworked man, that his mother mended too many garments, that his brother Horace led a humdrum life, and that Galatea had few pleasures, he decided that his flesh and blood came well within the terms of Virginia Garland's bequest.

Setting aside the origin and purpose of the money, it was certainly a generous instinct which prompted Oliver to give a great "treat" to his people; and their immense pleasure and pride rewarded him. During the first six months of his residence in Barton Street he had seen little of his family. They lived but a three-halfpenny tramcar ride away from him, yet, in his mind's eye, it seemed a world away. He had entered into a new world, with new friends, new ideas, new manners.

He did not care—as time went on he cared less and less—to retrace his steps even for an hour or two and go back to that house in Denmark Hill, with its old associations of a mean little home-life. He felt that it dragged him down. The sight of the threadbare carpets, of the broken springs in the big armchair, of the cheap china ornaments on the mantelpiece, of the brown earthenware teapot hurt him almost physically, hurt him as a German oleograph would shock the eyeballs of a Post-Impressionist.

His rare appearance in Denmark Hill was the cause of grief beyond words to his mother. She waited for him like a sweetheart her lover. Every unexpected knock at the door made her heart jump with the hope of "There's Oliver!" Every tea-time she hoped that he might come to supper. When every supper had passed she buoyed herself up with the hope that he would come to tea next day. When the weeks passed and he did not come at all, she was miserable, and new lines crept about her eyes and mouth.

Often she would drop her sewing and sit thinking and thinking, in a brooding way, of his handsome face and gaiety of heart and careless ways. She wrote little notes to him, begging him to come more often, pleading for the sight of him. When he answered them it was often on a

postcard, with just a line: "Frightfully busy!" or "Hope to see you soon."

Mr. Lumley was still working overtime, to pay that pound a week which he had promised for a year. It made supper-time an hour later, and, for that reason, he had been compelled to tell his wife the cause of his extra industry. He took some credit to himself, as he had every right to do.

"I am glad to help the boy in his career," he said simply. "But I think no one can accuse me of not being a devoted father. I have not begrudged the sweat of my brow."

To that Mrs. Lumley replied: "I should think not, indeed. For what other reason do we bring children into the world, except to work for them and love them?"

This seemed a hard answer to Richard Lumley. Just for a moment he was filled with a kind of unreasoning hatred against his own son, coupled with an intense anger with his wife for taking all that he did for granted. His pallid face flushed, and he took off his spectacles and rubbed them nervously with his handkerchief. Then he restrained himself from uttering bitter words, which he knew he would regret, and said, meekly enough, "I suppose so, my dear."

It was Galatea who said the bitter words without restraint. She accused Oliver of having forgotten his family, and of being ashamed of them. She had a "scene" with her mother because she said that Oliver's heart was as big as a monkey-nut, and that he had the selfish vanity of an actress in musical comedy.

Galatea had become the typist secretary of a patent medicine proprietor in the City, and she suffered from typist's headache, so that when she came home at seven o'clock she vowed that her hat weighed as heavily as the dome of St. Paul's. As she confessed frankly to her mother, after a few tears and much contrition, her hard sayings against Oliver were caused by fiddle-string nerves and general bad temper with "life and everything." Upon this plea she was almost forgiven, though, as Mrs. Lumley confided to Horace, she could not understand how Galatea could say such cruel and horrible things about a brother so good and kind as Oliver.

"My dear mother," said Horace in his quiet way, "Galatea does not mean half what she says, and the other half she is sorry for. Fortunately, I am not given to many words, so I am saved a lot of misery."

But though Horace did not use many words he thought a good deal, and Oliver gave him cause for anxiety.

## CHAPTER XII

### MAIDS AND MEN

Four or five times Horace called at Barton Street, Westminster, after his day's work in the City, in the hope of smoking a pipe with his brilliant brother. But only once did he find Oliver in his rooms. Mrs. Trant, the landlady, informed him that five nights out of six "the young gentleman" put on a starched shirt and went to places which, to her mind, being an old-fashioned body, were no better than they should be. She referred to "them music-halls and such-like," which were the ruination of young people, putting no end of foolish ideas into their heads. Many was the maid-servant she had had who had gone straight to the bad from the gallery of the "nine-o'clock house." She had got one now who would sing flashy songs while cleaning the boots, and whom she had caught imitating Marie Lloyd before a looking-glass when she was supposed to be making the beds. In duty bound Mrs. Trant had given the girl "what-for" and sent her down to the kitchen with a flea in her ear.

Upon hearing that Horace was the brother of her lodger, she confided to him that Mr. Oliver was most irregular with his payments and owed her for eight weeks' board and lodging.

"If it weren't for his tongue, which could talk the hind leg off a donkey," said the landlady, "I wouldn't put up with such habits. But there—when he puts on that smile of his and begins his artful flattery, he makes me as soft as butter. I'm not the only woman he makes a fool of, and that's certain. I'm sure I pity the poor girls that he casts his black eyes on."

So she rattled on to Horace, at the hall door, until at the first pause he lifted his hat and strode away, filled with melancholy forebodings as to Oliver's future.

But one evening, after several visits, he found his brother actually at home. He was giving a supper-party to some friends, who happened to be Miss Livvy O'Brien and Miss Doris Fortescue. Horace felt overwhelmingly embarrassed when he stood in the doorway of the front parlour and saw his brother sitting in a cane armchair before the fire, with an extremely pretty young person in a blue dress on his knees, with her arms round Oliver's neck and her face against his cheek, while at the piano sat another girl in a fluffy muslin frock, singing a little ballad called "Catch me! Catch me! Catch me!" in a piping soprano. A cup of coffee stood at the pianist's right hand on the keyboard, and a blue wreath of smoke rose from a half-burnt cigarette suspended between the ears of a comical china cat on the music-rest.

The supper-table had not been cleared away, and was littered with the remnants of the feast, which displayed the bones of mutton cutlets in white paper frills.

It was the girl at the piano—Doris Fortescue—who first caught sight of Horace's grave, embarrassed face in the doorway. She smudged her notes, stopped singing in the middle of a line, and said with the prettiest impudence:

"Is this the ghost of Hamlet's father, or an undertaker to measure a corpse? Stranger, speak, I conjure thee!"

"What the dickens are you talking about over there, little one?" said Oliver.

He released himself from Livvy's arms, and turned his head round. When he saw Horace he uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise.

"Horace, by Jove!"

He gave Livvy a little push, and stood up with a reddening face. Then he laughed boisterously, but in an artificial way. It would be difficult to say which of the brothers was more embarrassed.

"I'm afraid I am in the way," said Horace. "I just looked in to—er—see how you are, old man. I'd better be going."

"Oh, rot! Come in and warm your toes." Oliver pulled himself together.

"Let me introduce you—Miss O'Brien, Miss Fortescue. Livvy, this is my brother Horace, one of the best."

"How do you do?" said Miss Livvy, taking Horace's limp hand, and looking up into his face with mischievous eyes. "What a nice big brother!"

"Horace?" said Miss Doris Fortescue, swinging round on the music-stool. "Delightful name! It reminds me of a song I used to sing:

> "Horace was a curate,
> Horace was so shy!
> He hardly could endure it
> When Kitty winked her eye!"

The real Horace blushed up to the roots of his hair, fumbled with his hat and stick, and again reiterated his opinion that he had better be going. But Doris Fortescue would not hear of such a thing.

"Going!" she cried. "My dear good man, you have arrived just in time to save a tragedy. Livvy has entirely monopolised your baby brother, and I was left all on my lonesome, and horribly out in the cold. I was just going to break things."

She put her hands on Horace's arm and led him over to the horsehair sofa. "Here we will rest awhile under the greenwood tree. Upon this mossy bank there is just room enough for you and me."

She took a seat, tucked in her skirt, and patted a cushion as an invitation to Horace to make use of it. He sat down awkwardly, and stared gravely at the carpet.

The two girls studied him with the frankest curiosity, their quick eyes roving over his rather worn, pale face, over his shabby suit and his thick boots. Then they laughed together very merrily, so that Horace prayed that the floor would open and swallow him up.

"Have a whisky, old man?" said Oliver.

"No, thank you, Roly," said Horace. "I can't stay more than a few minutes."

The name by which he called Oliver was instantly seized upon by the two girls. Livvy went off into a little shriek of laughter. 'Oh, how exquisite! Roly-poly puddiny-pie!"

"Roly!" cried Doris Fortescue, clapping her hands. She began to sing one of her little songs:

"A frog he would a-wooing go—
Hey, ho, said Roly—
Whether his mother would wish him or no——"

She did not complete the song, but finished it with a peal of silvery notes, and threw a cushion at Oliver, who caught it just in time to save a candlestick.

"How perfectly it fits the character of our dear Oliver!" said Livvy, who was kneeling on the floor, with her hands on Oliver's knees. "How often he goes a-wooing, whether his mother would wish it or no!"

So they prattled on, and Doris assured Horace that she would be eternally grateful to him for having revealed that precious nickname, which she would never, never forget.

Horace sat silent. He found both these young ladies remarkably unconventional. Never in his life had he been in the same room with such girls. At first he was half-scared. He felt that it was impossible for him to foresee what they would do next. He had alarming forebodings. He was filled with a profound anxiety for his brother Oliver, who had fallen into the company of these dangerous young creatures.

But gradually the sprightliness of Miss Livvy and Miss Doris, and their overflowing good humour, made him feel less ill at ease. Their utter lack of shyness and self-consciousness relieved his own bashfulness. Yet he blushed like a schoolboy when Doris Fortescue, sitting rather close to him on the horsehair sofa, confessed that a delicious dreaminess was taking possession of her little body and soul, and laying her head against his shoulder, begged him to tell her a ghost story while the firelight flickered in the grate.

Horace caught a glance from Oliver's eyes in which there was a sly amusement. He was sitting up stiffly and awkwardly and wishing to Heaven that the young lady would remove her fluffy head from his shoulder. He protested that he knew no ghost story, nor any other kind of story, and again reiterated his statement that

he must be going. But Doris Fortescue took his hand, and fondled it in her lap, vowing that he would be the beastliest kind of beast if he broke up the harmony of the evening, and her blessed sense of peacefulness.

It was Livvy who told a story. It was the story of an adventurous love affair with a young actor in the provinces who had persecuted her with his attentions until she conspired with the rest of the company to make him a laughing stock. Miss Livvy told the story with a wealth of dramatic detail, as she sat on a footstool with Oliver as her head-rest. In the excitement of the story her Irish accent became more marked, and her dark eyes danced with merriment. The dreaminess of Doris was dispelled by her friend's narrative, and she laughed quite hysterically at the end of it, so that the springs of the sofa creaked under her, jerking Horace up and down as though he were on wires. He was caught up also by the infectiousness of her laughter, and his dry "Ha ha!" was like the croak of a raven to the rippling mirth of these two nightingales.

"A miracle!" cried Livvy when her story finished. "I have put a smile on to the face of your big brother, Roly, dear infant. Sure, I thought he would always be as grave as an undertaker!"

"I won't have you say unkind things about his face," said Doris, turning round on the sofa, and looking at Horace. "It is a very nice face, a very handsome face. As old Shakespeare says, we shall never look upon his like again."

It was then that Horace struggled up to go, and released himself from Miss Fortescue's affectionate clasp. Oliver, who had been enjoying himself enormously in a quiet way, by watching his brother's behaviour, saw him out to the front door, and asked him in a whisper what he thought of the girls.

"Remarkable young women," said Horace gravely. "I advise you to be careful, old man."

"They're as harmless as doves," said Oliver. "Well, good-bye, old chap. Glad you came. I will go over to Denmark Hill in a day or two."

He watched his brother stride down the street, and noticed with a touch of pity how shabby he looked, and

how his shoulders were humped by years of office work. "Poor old Horace!" he thought, as he shut the door. And as Horace walked to the nearest tram to Denmark Hill he thought, "Poor old Oliver! I am afraid he is running into danger. What amazing young women! . . . I wish he did not owe for all that rent."

He did not tell his mother or father the full details of that evening with Oliver in Barton Street, but he rejoiced Mrs. Lumley's heart by telling her that Oliver had promised to come over to see them very soon.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE GENEROUS HEART

On the rare days when Oliver was able to tear himself away from those serious studies of life, in order to visit his old home, he came like a god out of the machine to the house in Rosemary Avenue.

Not like Horace did he use the humble tramway. He came in the magnificence of a motor-cab. The noise of its panting petrol-tank, and all its glorious rattle and roar, as it pulled up in front of Number 33, caused some of the neighbours to put their heads out of window and afterwards to comment upon the Lumley's "successful son."

No sound was more joyous to the ears of Mrs. Lumley herself, though, after her warm embrace, she rebuked Oliver gently for his extravagance.

"It seems such dreadful waste of money," she said, "when the tuppences go ticking on that little machine. They are hard enough to earn, and so quick to run away."

But Oliver replied, in his careless, royal way, that with him time was money, and that what saved his brain saved his pocket.

It was curious that each member of Oliver's family felt a little ill at ease when he came back to them. The splendour of his appearance seemed to reproach their own poverty. Even the brilliance of his patent-leather boots made the drawing-room carpet seem more thread-bare. The beautiful creases in his trousers were a silent contrast to the baggy knees of Mr. Lumley and Horace. His conversation, too, gay and good-hearted as it was, abashed them and made them feel uncomfortable. He spoke light-heartedly of tea-parties at the house of a certain Lady Goldstein, with whom he seemed on terms of intimate friendship, and described in his humorous

way the foibles of the distinguished men and women, many of them titled, whom he met there.

To Mr. and Mrs. Lumley it was a startling thing that their boy should appear on terms of equality with such great people, but that he should make fun of them was awe-inspiring. Only Galatea pretended to be quite unmoved by all this grandeur into which Oliver had made his way. She took a kind of bitter pleasure in reminding her brother of the days when he had inked the seams of his boots, and pleaded with her to sew up the ends of his frayed trousers. She also exaggerated the contrast between what she called the "squalor" of her own life as a typist in the City and his luxurious habits.

One such scene took place a few nights after Horace's visit to Barton Street, when Oliver redeemed his promise to spend an evening at home.

Galatea came in late. She had had to fight for a tram at Blackfriars in a downpour of rain. Her boots were covered with mud, her skirt was be-draggled and splashed, and she looked cold and miserable.

Oliver was sitting in the one armchair, drawn close to the fire. He had been giving his mother a vivid description of a first night at the opera, for which he had obtained a ticket from a friend. Galatea overheard a sentence or two about the gorgeous dresses of the women. She took off her wet hat, and stabbed it several times with a long pin.

"I suppose you would despise those women," she said in a hard voice, "if they earned their living honestly, and had to wade in the mud and slush of life?"

"My dear girl," said Oliver, "if they had to do that I should not have seen them at the opera. They are the women of the Smart Set. You should see all their diamonds, by Jove! Simply blazing!"

"Disgusting vulgarity, I call it," said Galatea. "And they are all loose-living creatures."

"Oh, no!" said Oliver, as though he were intimately acquainted with all of them. "That is too sweeping, my dear. Some of them are charming women, as simple as possible. Of course they can't help being rich. They were just born with the luck."

"They were born bad," said Galatea. "They are

rotten at the heart, as greedy as vultures, as selfish as cats, and utterly vain and foolish."

"My dear child," said Oliver, with the severity of an elder brother, "you know nothing about them. Talk of something with which you are more familiar."

"Yes!" said Galatea, restraining a passion of anger, which brought a swift flush to her face. "I will talk of girls like myself, who do the drudgery of life. I will talk of the horror of typing six hours, seven hours, nine hours a day, until one has an iron band round the head, bursting one's brain. I will talk of tea-shop luncheons for fivepence, and the insulting familiarity of City clerks who sit in the same room at the office, and the struggle for the tramcar morning and evening. I know all about those things. I am very familiar with that way of life!"

She spoke with such intense feeling, and her eyes were fired with such a fierce light, that Oliver was startled, and Mrs. Lumley said, "Hush, my dear. Why speak so bitterly?"

"Shall I tell you why?"

She laughed scornfully, and gave a swift, straight glance at Oliver.

"It is because I come home to find one of my brothers boasting of his social success, and condescending to his own family, as though they were inferior to him. And all the while I drudge and drudge, in order to add a few shillings to the housekeeping money, while Oliver—noble fellow!—is living a gay life without helping his father or mother by so much as a single farthing! There, the truth is out now!"

The truth being out, she burst into tears, and went hurriedly into the next room. Certainly her words of truth were painful. They left Oliver rather white, and with two lines across his forehead which were only visible when he was very angry. Mrs. Lumley was almost in tears herself. As though Oliver were a distinguished stranger who had been insulted at her hearthside, she apologised for Galatea's behaviour.

"Her nerves have gone all wrong. The poor girl drinks too much tea, I am afraid, and that office of hers is warmed by hot-water pipes. Please do not take her

words to heart, my dear boy. She has a great love and admiration for you."

"It seems like it," said Oliver drily.

For an hour or two he was rather quiet and thoughtful, and avoided looking at Galatea's red eyes when she sat at the supper-table. But afterwards, when his father and Horace had come in, he forced himself to be cheerful and chatty, and then made a proposal which put them in a good humour, and restored his self-complacency.

"Look here, I haven't celebrated my modest success in literature by any family function. What do you say to a box at the theatre—His Majesty's—and a little dinner afterwards at Michel's in Soho? It would be very jolly, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, Oliver," said Mrs. Lumley, "how sweet of you!"

"My dear boy," said his father, "you are very good and kind. But wouldn't it cost you a great deal of money? Are you sure you can afford such an expense?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Oliver airily. He added as an afterthought that he had put by a little sum for this special purpose. He did not mention that it was Miss Virginia Garland's charity. His people had never heard of Virginia Garland, so it was no use going into that matter.

His father had a new objection.

"There is another thing," he said, hesitating a little, as though slightly embarrassed. "I have not an evening dress suit. As you know, I have never had much time for the social side of life."

"Same here," said Horace. "We should not do you credit in a box, Roly."

Oliver could not deny that a white shirt-front was essential in such a position, but, not to be beaten, he said: "Very well, then, if you *will* be so haughty, we will get a row of seats in the dress-circle. Strange as it may seem, that is a place in which you needn't dress."

He turned to Galatea and said: "You will come, won't you, Gally-pot?"

It was a peace-offering, and Galatea's lips, which had been rather tremulous after her tears, softened into a smile.

"I should love to. But how about a frock?"

"Oh, any old thing will do," said Oliver. "Whatever you wear you will be the prettiest girl in the theatre."

"Bravo!" said Horace, "and hear, hear!"

This tribute to his sister's beauty put him into a good humour with Oliver for the rest of the evening, and made him forget a serious conversation which he had decided to have with his brother on the question of money matters.

Galatea had blushed deeply at the compliment, and a little while later she took a footstool at Oliver's knees, and stroked his hand, as a silent plea for forgiveness.

Oliver was now in good spirits, and talked a long time about his literary schemes—of the great novel which was taking shape in his brain, and of the play with which, one day, not very far off, he was going to make a pile of money.

"There is nothing like the drama for money-making on a big scale."

When he went back to Barton Street, as eleven o'clock struck, he had talked his family into the belief that he was on the high road to fortune. Not even Galatea doubted that he would soon be driving up to Rosemary Avenue in a motor-car of his own. She had a vision of him in a fur-lined coat costing at the very least one hundred guineas. Curiously enough, as Oliver drove back in a taxi he had the same idea.

## CHAPTER XIV

### HUMILIATION OF A YOUNG GENTLEMAN

The evening at the theatre with his family, followed by a dinner at Michel's, cost Oliver more than five pounds, for he was in a generous mood, and determined to "do" his people well. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, he was not called upon to pay for the dinner there and then, for M. Michel knew the young gentleman as one of his regular customers, and was willing to hold over the bill.

Oliver had put on his beautiful evening clothes (with the velvet collar and broad silk stripe), and this nobility of appearance was rather disconcerting to his father and mother. They had done their best to rise to the occasion, but Oliver was rather painfully aware that his father's shirt-cuffs had been "whiskered" in the wash, and that his black suit looked as if it had seen much service at family funerals.

Horace wore his City clothes, and the sleeves of his morning coat were shiny with much desk-polishing, while his trousers fell into curious folds and creases.

Mrs. Lumley had put on a black satin dress, which Oliver remembered as her best gown so far back as his childhood, when he used to take advantage of the bedroom cupboard in games of hide-and-seek with Horace and Galatea. It smelt strongly of camphor, and had last been used at the marriage of Oliver's aunt Alice, five years ago.

These reminiscences shocked him. The extreme poverty of his family was distressing to his own pride. Only Galatea was consoling in her appearance. She was wearing a simple gown of cream silk, cut low at the throat, round which she had put a little string of cheap pearls. With her dark hair looped above her ears, and a little flush of excitement on her cheeks, she made a

pretty figure as she stood in the vestibule, and Oliver whispered his praise.

"Well done, Gally-pot! You look charming!"

But the shabbiness of his father and brother, and the old-fashioned gown of his mother, filled him with a sense of uneasiness. He hoped fervently that none of his friends would be in the theatre that night. As it happened, Hardy the journalist came in at that very moment.

"Halloa, Roly, young spark," he said, "what mischief are you up to to-night?"

Then he noticed that Oliver had people with him. His babe-blue eyes glanced at each member of the family. Oliver knew that this keen student of humanity would not fail to notice his father's frayed cuffs, his brother's baggy trousers and shiny elbows, his mother's long-preserved gown, his sister's home-made frock. Hardy himself wore an opera hat tilted rather rakishly at the back of his handsome head, a long motor-coat reaching to his heels, and open in front, so that it revealed the frilled white shirt across his broad chest. He stood three inches higher than Oliver, and was a distinguished figure in the vestibule.

"Who are your pals?" he said, as Oliver moved a little on one side of him.

"Oh, friends."

"Is it your landlady's family? Funny old frumps, aren't they? The old boy looks very pleased with himself, and rather awestricken at this gilded hall."

"As a matter of fact," said Oliver, "those funny old frumps are my father and mother."

His face was very red with anger and humiliation.

Hardy lifted his eyebrows, and then gave a quiet laugh.

"I say! I'm sorry! Why didn't you tell me?"

He was very cool, and only slightly disconcerted.

"What a charming girl that is. Your sister?"

"It is," said Oliver stiffly.

"I congratulate you. Introduce me, will you?"

Oliver would have liked to refuse, but his resentment was softened by Hardy's friendly squeeze of the arm, and by his genuine look of admiration at Galatea. He took him over to the family group, where Hardy made

honourable amends for his indiscretion, and behaved charmingly.

To Mr. Lumley he said: "I am an old school-fellow of your son, sir. I was delighted to meet him again."

"Ah!" said Mr. Lumley, whose face lit up with pride, "my son has a brilliant career before him. His imaginative gifts are a constant surprise to us."

"They must be!" said Hardy.

He made some amiable and flattering remark to Mrs. Lumley, and then turned to Galatea with a delightful smile and admiring eyes.

"I suppose you are very fond of the theatre?"

"I hardly ever go. But I love it."

"You must allow me to send you some tickets now and again," said Hardy.

Between the acts Hardy came round to the dress-circle with a big box of chocolates tied up with pale-blue ribbon, and handed them to Galatea. Until the curtain went up again he stayed chatting, and was so respectful to Mr. Lumley, so immensely impressed, it seemed, with Mr. Lumley's dramatic criticism and philosophical remarks on the greatness of Shakespeare, so friendly in his attitude to Horace, and so chivalrous to Galatea, that Oliver almost forgave him for his *faux pas* in the vestibule.

At the end of the second act he came to say good-bye.

"I have a little dinner-party on, so that I must be getting away now."

He shook hands with Mr. Lumley, and assured him that he would remember some of his words, which had shed an entirely new light upon the character of Hamlet.

"Sir," said Mr. Lumley, in the manner of Dr. Johnson, "I lead a quiet life, but Shakespeare has given me some knowledge of human nature. I am glad that my ideas do not seem to you quite worthless."

"On the contrary," said Hardy warmly; "on the contrary, my dear sir!"

He took Galatea's hand, and held it for a moment longer than was quite necessary.

"I hope very much I shall see you again."

Galatea did not answer, but her face had a deeper colour, and when Hardy had gone Oliver noticed that

his sister's eyes were strangely luminous, and that she did not take any part in the family conversation.

Mr. Lumley launched into a panegyric of their new friend, and was of the decided opinion that he was a most intelligent and respectable young man. Mrs. Lumley thought that he was the handsomest young gentleman she had ever seen, with the exception of some one whom she would not mention. The proud mother woke in her eyes, and Oliver smiled at her.

"Is he quite sincere, do you think?" asked quiet old Horace.

Oliver chuckled.

"He is a champion poseur."

It was then that Galatea spoke for the first time after Hardy's good-bye.

"I do not know what you mean by 'poseur,' but he is certainly the soul of kindness."

"Oh, he is good-natured," said Oliver. "Quite a decent fellow, though inclined to put on airs. I'm glad you like him. In the old days we used to call him Kiss-me-Hardy—after Nelson's pal."

## CHAPTER XV

### A LADY OF QUALITY

By an extraordinary coincidence, the first person who met the gaze of the Lumley family on taking their table in Michel's restaurant was Hardy himself. He was sitting in a corner of the room with three men and one woman, who were all laughing, as though one of them had made an excellent joke.

It was the lady who had attracted Galatea's attention while Oliver was busy with the bill of fare. She seemed hardly older than Galatea herself, and was as fair as Galatea was dark. She had hair of pale gold, full of little waves, in which the lights and shadows played. Her rather long mouth with its arched lips was curved into a satirical smile, and in her brown eyes there was a dancing light of merriment. She had a long, straight neck, upon which her head was supported like a flower on its stalk, and the sleeves of her dove-grey gown were short enough to show her arms bare to the elbows. She was thin, and her elbows were pointed, but no man would have called her scraggy, because she had a softness of line and feature which just saved her from being angular. She was playing with a cigarette—hardly smoking it; and as her right arm with its little pointed elbow on the white tablecloth swayed to and from beneath the curling smoke, there was a glint of diamonds on her fingers and wrist.

"What a pretty woman!" said Galatea, and then she caught her breath a little and said, "Why, there is Mr. Hardy again!"

The eyes of the Lumley family were turned to that table in the corner of the restaurant. Oliver gave a sharp exclamation and flushed up to the temples.

With that strange magnetism of the human eye the gaze of the Lumley family attracted the attention of the

dinner-party at the other table. Hardy, who was sitting with his back to Oliver's people, turned round, and when he saw them again he gave a start of surprise. For a moment he also seemed embarrassed and disconcerted. But he quickly recovered himself and gave a smiling greeting to them all. At the same moment the lady, who was sitting opposite to him, looked towards Oliver. She spoke his name so clearly that her words could be heard across the restaurant.

"Why, there is Roly!"

She raised a wine-glass, touched it with her lips, and smiled across to him. Then her eyes roved upon the family group, with the frankest curiosity, until she looked again at Oliver, with a little raising of the eyebrows as though to say, "Who are those people with you?"

Oliver returned her wine-glass greeting. Galatea could see that he was trying to conceal his nervousness. His hand trembled as he held the menu while the French waiter stood by his side and said, "*Quel vin, monsieur?*"

"Who is she?" asked Galatea.

"That is Lady Goldstein. . . . Strange that she should be here."

"Lady Goldstein!"

It was Mrs. Lumley who made the exclamation, and her husband and Horace showed equal surprise and consternation at the announcement. Many times Oliver had spoken of his friendship with Lady Goldstein, of the great receptions at her town-house—he always spoke of her "town-house," as though she had a mansion in the country—and of her literary evenings, at which all the most distinguished people in London were present. They were as astonished as Oliver to find that grand lady having dinner with four young men in a Soho restaurant.

Mrs. Lumley became rather fluttered, and smoothed down her black satin gown. She regretted that it had lain so long in her wardrobe that its creases would not disappear. Mr. Lumley thrust back his frayed cuffs, and Horace buttoned up his black morning coat to conceal his shabby waistcoat.

"Does she call you Roly?" asked Galatea.

"Why not?"

Oliver spoke irritably, and his face was gloomy. He was sorry for having brought his people to town. They were so obviously suburban, so utterly shabby-genteel. How on earth could he get them out of the restaurant without introducing them to Lady Goldstein ? She was so satirical, so critical of dress, so keen-witted and sharp-tongued, that he would never hold up his head in her drawing-room if she discovered that these people were his own family. Perhaps she knew already. Hardy would give him away. Her rippling laughter made him flush crimson again. No doubt she was laughing at the discovery already.

Once she had questioned him about his family, and he had told white lies to her, and represented his father as a City merchant. She would see now that he was only a shabby clerk. What on earth had made her come to this restaurant ? Oliver knew the men with her. One was Lord Hugh Marcroft, a boy just down from Oxford. The other was Gilbert Verney of the Wastrels. The third man was Halliday Wing, a black-and-white artist with a hobby for painting impressionistic pictures which nobody would buy. They belonged to the Goldstein crowd and were Katherine's particular pets and slaves. He could expect no mercy from them if they were introduced to his family.

Young Marcroft had his monocle stuck in his eye, and was staring over at Galatea. Then he turned to Lady Goldstein and said something in a quizzing way which made her smile. She, too, looked across at Galatea and then at his father and mother. Oliver knew that her quick eyes would notice every detail. He was ashamed of his own family, and then was horribly ashamed of being ashamed. It made him miserable during the meal. He sat moody and silent, except when he spoke so irritably to the waiters that he made his father and mother uncomfortable and brought a few words of protest from Galatea.

And his people did not understand the reason for his irritability. Mrs. Lumley thought her dear boy must be feeling tired. No doubt his brain was fagged with too much literary work. Mr. Lumley agreed that the mental strain of inventing new plots must be very severe.

He was curious to know the characters and occupations of other people in the restaurant; and when Oliver pointed out a fairly well-known actor, a journalist, and a minor poet—the latter was picking his teeth in a dreamy way, and jotting down lines on the back of an envelope—he said that he was much obliged to Oliver for giving him a peep into such a hostelry of the artistic professions. He regretted that as a young man he had not come West at times during the luncheon hour, instead of always taking his meals at an *à la mode* beef shop in Mincing Lane.

At the end of the meal Horace said, "No objection to putting on a pipe, I suppose?" and without waiting for an answer, loaded up, struck a match, and puffed away quietly, while he watched his brother through the haze of smoke. He could not make Oliver out. Something had upset him. That was quite certain.

Just then he noticed a sudden colour creep into Galatea's cheeks, and he was puzzled to account for her emotion, until he saw that Hardy had left the other table, and was crossing the room towards them.

He stood with his hand on the back of Oliver's chair, looking down upon them with his pleasant, whimsical smile. His eyes rested rather steadily on Galatea.

"Curious, meeting again like this! Our friend Oliver here would call it the long arm of coincidence, and one more proof that fact is stranger than fiction, eh?"

He put his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

"Roly, you are commanded to the Royal presence."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that her ladyship desires speech with you. She has been trying to catch your eye this twenty minutes, but you were looking straight down your nose."

Oliver hesitated, and did not seem inclined to move.

"We'll change seats," said Hardy.

Oliver rose rather awkwardly, and then glanced over to Lady Goldstein. She beckoned him, with a "Come hither" in her eye, and he could not resist the invitation. As he left the table Hardy took his chair, and, speaking to Galatea, said, "Well, what do you think of Michel's?"

Oliver crossed the room, and Lady Goldstein stretched out her hand, and gave him her little finger to shake.

"Rude boy. Why have you ignored me all this time?"

"Ignored you? Why, I bowed to you in my best style!"

He sat down, and brushed away Hardy's bread-crumbs.

"I did not expect to see you here."

"No?" said Lady Goldstein. "Surely this is a perfectly respectable place?"

"Oh, perfectly!"

"Well, then?"

She challenged him with her eyes for an explanation.

Oliver was unable to give one, except that Soho was "a far cry" from Pont Street, and not nearly so elegant.

"My dear child," said Lady Goldstein, who perhaps was two years older than Oliver himself, "don't you think I may sometimes be allowed to escape from my husband's flunkeys and from the French maid my husband provides for me, and from my husband's Chippendale and Sheraton furniture, and from the amiable but somewhat dull society of my husband's German relatives?"

She spoke with a serious air, as though demanding a serious answer, but as she blew a puff of cigarette smoke through her fingers she laughed at her own words.

"Oh, those flunkeys! It is a tremendous relief not to have them standing behind one's chair, and handing things over one's shoulder, and saying, 'Yes, my lady—No, my lady.' One of them is named Smithers, and the other Brown. I think I hate Smithers worst. He was once butler to a bishop, and has such portentous solemnity. I feel I shock him by my levity every time I laugh. I can feel his hard, grave eyes fixed upon my backbone every time I sit down to table in evening clothes."

It was a habit of Lady Goldstein to indulge in little monologues of excitable eloquence, and she ignored such interruptions as Marcroft's "By Jove, now, really?"

"Before I married Goldy, and when I wrote Society paragraphs for the papers, I used to come to some of these restaurants in Soho with the Fleet Street boys. Hardy was one of them!"

She gave a long-drawn sigh, and looked round the stuffy little restaurant, and away to the red-baize window blinds, beyond which there was the light of street lamps and the noise of cabs and motor-cars.

"I feel like a bird escaped out of a gilded cage into the ragged old nest in the hedge-row. It is much more fun in the hedge-row."

Then she laughed and said, "How is that for a simile?"

"Good Lord!" said Oliver, "you were never in Fleet Street, were you? Hardy never told me."

He was astonished beyond measure, and filled with a curious sense of disappointment. He had always thought that Katherine Goldstein belonged to an old aristocratic family.

"Of course I was! And a very smart journalist I made, though I say so as shouldn't. I used to dream of 'scoops,' and when I earned three pounds a week I thought I was on the high road to fortune. As it happened, I was not wrong, for at the end of the road I met Goldy. Hence these glittering baubles."

She flashed the rings in the light of a candle on the table, and said, "Silly trash!"

Lord Hugh Marcroft was willing to bet her any money that she would not like to return to the squalor of Fleet Street. As for those bits of glittering stone, he knew from Goldy himself that she had a barbaric passion for them. He was sorry to see a young lady so deliberately insincere.

Gilbert Verney—whom Oliver had met at the Wastrels Club on the famous Thursday nights—chuckled in his hoarse way, and gave one of his portentous winks.

"Funny thing. People who have captured the oof bird always despise the creature. I have been setting snares for it these ten years past. It always hops beyond my reach. Sad! Sad!"

"You raven!" said Lady Goldstein. "I'm tired of your croaks. I have introduced you to dozens of rich girls with a view to matrimony."

"My face frightens 'em," said Gilbert Verney. "They flutter away to high perches."

He gazed mournfully into his tankard of beer.

"We all owe a deep debt of gratitude to our dear Lady Katherine here," said Halliday Wing, the black-and-white artist.

"Explain!" said Lady Goldstein. "I adore gratitude."

"She invites the children of poverty to her sumptuous tea-parties. In our muddy boots we are able to stroll upon velvet pile carpets. In our threadbare trousers we sit upon real Chippendale. The noble condescension of her flunkey's is like a benediction to our half-starved souls."

Gilbert Verney chuckled in the depths of his big tankard and young Marcroft laughed in his high-pitched boy's voice.

"Is that sarcasm?" asked Lady Goldstein severely. "Don't forget, young man, that owing to my influence Goldy has bought three of your feeble paintings at exorbitant prices."

"Which now hang in the butler's pantry and the French maid's bedroom," said Mr. Halliday Wing, stroking his silky Vandyke beard.

So they rattled on, talking sheer nonsense like children in the big nursery of life. Under cover of a mock quarrel between Halliday Wing and the Marcroft boy, Lady Goldstein had some private conversation with Oliver.

"That is a pretty sister of yours, Roly."

"How did you know it was my sister?"

Oliver was abashed by Lady Goldstein's knowledge. He was tempted to deny that he had any blood-relationship with his guests at the other table. His old shame about their shabbiness crept over him again.

"Hardy told me. He is tremendously taken with her. You must bring her to tea with me. And your father and mother too."

"They lead very quiet lives," said Oliver.

Lady Goldstein's frank eyes were fixed upon him with a searching look.

"You are a strange boy," she said. "I cannot make you out."

She turned to Lord Hugh Marcroft and Halliday Wing.

"It is time to go back to my golden cage. The male bird will have ruffled feathers."

Gilbert Verney closed the lid of his tankard and said, "Sad! Sad!"

Halliday Wing put on her cloak. M. Michel bowed low before her as she passed, as though a queen had visited his restaurant.

She stopped at Oliver's table, where Hardy was still sitting.

The Lumley family had brightened up. Galatea, with deep roses in her cheeks, was laughing at Hardy's whimsical anecdotes. Horace was puffing at his pipe with a quiet smile of thorough enjoyment. Mr. and Mrs. Lumley were beaming at the handsome fellow who was entertaining them with his stories of life up and down the world. They were surprised when Lady Goldstein bent forward to Galatea and said:

"I should be so glad to know Oliver Lumley's sister. Has he ever spoken to you of Lady Goldstein?"

"Shall I make the formal introduction?" said Hardy, laughing at this somewhat unconventional approach.

"Oh, your ladyship," said Mrs. Lumley, "you have been very kind to my dear boy."

"No. He has been kind to me."

Mr. Lumley had stood up, and was bowing in an old-fashioned way. Lady Goldstein shook hands with him, and as she released his hand one of his frayed cuffs, which was fastened on to his shirt with a button, fell on to his plate.

"Pardon me, my lady!" said the poor gentleman, immensely embarrassed by this accident. He picked up the cuff and put it into his tail pocket, and Oliver, who stood by, saw that young Marcroft was struggling to preserve a decent gravity, and that the right side of Gilbert Verney's face was contorted by a grotesque wink.

Oliver prayed that the floor of Michel's restaurant might open up and swallow him—but his prayer was not granted.

Lady Goldstein herself seemed to be entirely oblivious of this little incident, and speaking in a gracious way to Mrs. Lumley hoped that she would bring her daughter to 31, Pont Street one afternoon.

"Your ladyship is most kind," said Mrs. Lumley. "But we are very humble folk."

"I hope I am not without humility myself," said Lady Goldstein, and then laughed in the simplest way at her own words. Her laughter was infectious, and all but Oliver, who stood on one side, getting hot and cold, joined in her gaiety. Then putting her hand on young Marcroft's arm, and with a smiling bow which included all the Lumley family, she passed out of the restaurant leaving behind an effect of radiance and charm.

## CHAPTER XVI

### MENTAL ARITHMETIC

Oliver found that life as a bachelor in London was amazingly expensive. He discovered also that the career of a man of letters is not a highway paved with gold between a hedge-row of roses.

On the contrary, it was a pebbly road which wore out his patent-leather boots literally and symbolically, and there were many spiky thorns along the way which pricked him most horribly. At first he had started out with a fair amount of luck. A good many of his short stories had been accepted, and editors had asked for more. What encouraged him still further was the accepting from time to time of essays on life by a new Review. Reckoning his earnings for the first nine months at Barton Street he worked them out on paper as very nearly a hundred and fifty pounds. With his father's allowance of a pound a week it should have been enough to live on with some comfort. (He left Virginia Garland's bounty out of his reckoning). But the figures on paper were not realised in fact. It was necessary to wait for the publication of his stories until he received payment, and in many cases he had to wait a good long time.

Worse still, the new Review had printed his essays, but they had not paid for them. His numerous visits to the office had resulted in one audience by the editor, who was charming and most appreciative of his work, by whom he was referred to the cashier. The cashier, being a busy man, was invariably "engaged" or "out," when Oliver called again. The office boy, though a youth of some haughtiness, admitted that he was powerless to make literary payments out of the petty cash. Oliver's letters remained unanswered.

Ten pounds for writing an advertisement of a new

restaurant—Hardy had put it in his way—saved him from imminent ruin. Another twenty pounds for a series of lurid detective stories for *The Boys' Budget* gave him a few weeks' respite from the pressing demands of numerous creditors, of whom his landlady was the most vexatious. He borrowed ten pounds from Hardy, and five pounds from Gilbert Verney, and he owed several half-sovereigns to other members of the "Wastrels," besides having a fairly heavy account against him at the club on account of liquid refreshment.

It would be wearisome to analyse other debts incurred by this rising young literary man, but they were numerous and pressing enough to make him start rather violently if any friend happened to touch him on the shoulder in the street.

High-spirited though he was by nature, and of a sanguine temperament, he was haunted by a real anxiety when his creative gifts showed signs of flagging. Plots did not come so easily to him, and he found it increasingly difficult to ring the changes on the familiar situations used and used again by magazine story-tellers. He had got into hot water more than once for going too close to the original. One letter from an editor used an ugly word. It was "plagiarism," and the editor was "almost of opinion that he could indict him for obtaining money under false pretences." This closed one magazine against him, and made him more careful of the source from which he obtained his suggestions.

Then he was tempted by a painful dislike of literary labour. He quarrelled with his pen. A block of white paper lying on his desk with a silent invitation made him annoyed at the mere sight of it. He had always been bad-tempered and irritable in the morning, having a sluggish liver; and to sit down after a late breakfast to do imaginative work was putting too great a strain upon his nature. The sun was shining out-of-doors. There were pretty women in the streets and parks. He had young blood and the zest of life. It was impossible to sit in a little stuffy room, working up a sensation, or sentimentalising over a love-story in the garish light of day. Life called to him, and he answered the invitation, deciding that his imaginative faculties were quicker and keener

late at night, when the brain becomes less trammelled by the flesh.

He made that a new rule—to enjoy social pleasures during the day, and to work at night. Unfortunately his day was often so prolonged that when he returned to his rooms at one o'clock in the morning he was too tired to do anything but tumble off his clothes and go to bed. Then the next morning he would wake with a headache, and curse his temperament—and so it happened that often two weeks would go by without a line of writing to the credit of our young man of letters.

He was sinking deeper and deeper into the mire of debt, and he was threatened by a severe financial crisis.

He saw it coming, and occasionally it made him go cold with fear. But these moments were rare. He still had faith in his Luck, and he still believed that the Muse would give him, one day, divine inspiration, in the style of "Sherlock Holmes" or "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray" (he would not quarrel with the exact form it might take), which would endow him with fortune, and lift him above the miserable struggle with poverty. "All great writers," he said, "have been through this phase." That thought comforted him a good deal. It seemed to him the proof that he had the true spark of genius.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE HOUSE IN PONT STREET

It was astonishing how his temperament enabled him to slip off his cares. He forgot all his debts when he was among his friends, and he did generous little deeds without counting their cost. The generous instincts of this young man, and his real kindness of heart (in spite of some faults), are not to be questioned at this stage of his career.

For instance, though he went often to Lady Goldstein's house in Pont Street (there was hardly an afternoon on which he did not take tea with her), he seldom called without bringing a little present for her. They were simple gifts, and to a young man with a good income the few shillings they cost need not have been considered. But to Oliver, whose earnings were so precarious, they were the cause of additional debt.

Lady Goldstein was so accustomed to these tributes that it never occurred to her that Oliver was buying them with borrowed money, for which one day there would come a reckoning.

Yet she was always grateful. When Oliver presented her with a beautiful bouquet of flowers (which she adored) she would say, "Roly, how good and kind of you!" One day she mentioned that she had never read *The Cloister and the Hearth*. Oliver made a mental note of it, and on the following afternoon he gave her a beautiful edition of the story, which had cost him a guinea.

Lady Goldstein, or Katherine, as she now allowed him to call her, was genuinely pleased with this. She blushed a little, and said, "Roly, I shall be afraid to mention any of my wishes. You are like the fairy godmother. Hey, presto! The gift flies into my lap."

She tapped him on the arm with a golden paper-knife with which she had begun to cut the pages. "Young man, I am afraid you are too extravagant."

"Pooh!" said Oliver, laughing. "It is poor payment for my lady's hospitality and graciousness."

He was quite sincere in saying that. Thinking the matter out, it seemed to him well worth his while to make these small gifts in return for the privilege of the open door in Pont Street. Hardy had done him a very good turn in taking him one evening to the Goldstein's. Since that evening he had been admitted into what he believed must be the most charming society of London.

Lady Goldstein herself was bewitching. Oliver had been startled by her beauty and delightful gaiety when Hardy had first brought him to one of her receptions. On that night he had been overwhelmed with the magnificence of the house, and utterly scared by the powdered footmen. Never before had he been in a room so splendidly furnished. It was an "Adams" room, and its white panelled walls were hung with full-length portraits. Among them was a portrait of Lady Goldstein herself by the most famous of modern painters. She was in a flowered muslin gown, holding the strings of a garden hat. Her hair seemed to have caught the sunlight and made a kind of golden aureole round her laughing face.

Oliver saw that the painter had caught the spirit of the face, for when Hardy brought him forward, she was laughing in just the same way among her friends. There was some statuary about the room, and on the rosewood piano a bronze head of Minerva. That evening Oliver Lumley, who was familiar with a horsehair sofa and cheap mahogany furniture, sat for the first time on Chippendale, and was very uncomfortable.

But Lady Goldstein's vivaciousness and simplicity soon put him at his ease, and in spite of his suburban upbringing he was not *gauche* in her society, but, on the contrary, obtained the favoured interest of his hostess, on account of his good looks and boyishness.

Yet there had been other good-looking men in the room, and Oliver came to know them very well. For though Lady Goldstein had a crowded drawing-room when she was "at home" and received many distinguished people, including at least one member of the Ministry (he was a Junior Lord of the Treasury), several

well-known politicians, mostly on the Conservative side, a Canon of St. Paul's, and a number of rich financiers, she had a little court of favourites who paid homage to her by almost daily attendance. At least one or two of them were sure to be found at her house on any afternoon or evening of the week. They included Halliday Wing the painter, Lord Hugh Marcroft the Oxford boy, Bertram Ordish, an eccentric dramatist who continually advertised his desire for a wife but still remained a bachelor, Mr. Francis Luttrell, and Mr. Edmund Grattan —both of Fleet Street—and a little Russian musician named Frolenko, who spoke, on the violin, words of witchery and love and dream-beauty.

Katherine Goldstein, who had once been Kitty Halstead, and a journalist in Fleet Street on three pounds a week, was happiest when she had only these friends in her drawing-room and was relieved of the duty of entertaining her husband's "pomposities," as she called them.

Oliver thanked the stars which had brought him to her drawing-room. For they were merry hours on dull afternoons and evenings when Lady Kitty sat on the carved oak coal-scuttle, or on a tapestried footstool four inches high, or on the carpet with her hands clasped round her knees (anywhere but on a chair), while Frolenko was fiddling softly through vague dream-worlds, while Edmund Grattan, who was an Irishman and a war correspondent, was telling whimsical stories of adventures in many countries, or in a street of adventure nearer at home, and while Bertram Ordish was telling fairy-tales invented on the hearth-rug, as he lay there at full length with the firelight flickering upon his long, clean-shaven face, and gleaming upon the bald patch above his forehead.

One of the footmen—it was generally Smithers, whose solemnity was imperturbable—would come into the drawing-room with a tea-tray, or, if it were evening, with coffee-cups, and at his coming Katherine Goldstein on the coal-scuttle, and Bertram Ordish on the hearth-rug, and Edmund Grattan, who was smoking a pipe, with the kind permission of his unconventional hostess (he would hide it in his pocket when Smithers came in),

would pretend to be entirely unaware of the intrusion of this tall, grim person in crimson livery and white stockings.

But if a tale were being told it came to a sudden pause, or if an argument were in progress—and they argued upon every subject 'twixt heaven and earth—it languished and fell flat until the majestic figure of the flunkey retired. Then Lady Goldstein permitted herself to make a little grimace at his back. Only Frolenko was undisturbed. He would go on playing dreamily. Sometimes, however, he would play Smithers out with a slow and stately tune like a funeral march.

Frolenko was not one of the long-haired fiddlers. He had short-cropped hair on a little bullet head, and was remarkably like a good-looking monkey, and just as mischievous. He was twenty-two years of age, earned three thousand a year by his concert performances, and spent every penny of it with the wildest extravagance. But he had the heart of a schoolboy, and in Katherine Goldstein's drawing-room he played the fool about as delightfully as the fiddle. He could imitate all the animals of the farmyard and all the birds of the air, so that any one passing the open windows of 31, Pont Street would imagine that a menagerie was inside the house. He was a source of real delight to the errand boys.

It was Frolenko also who organised a pillow-fight in the billiard-room, which resulted in an easy victory for himself and Lady Goldstein against Oliver and Edmund Grattan's wife—a beautiful, joyous-hearted woman who went by the name of " Mother Hubbard "—the destruction of an electric lamp, and a carpet strewn with feathers.

Such rowdiness, however, was only of rare occurrence, and the evenings were quiet enough, except for the passionate and excitable music with which Frolenko was sometimes inspired, and for the laughter of people who were such good friends that they could quarrel with each other in the most agreeable manner possible. Lady Goldstein had a habit of quarrelling particularly with Mr. Francis Luttrell, a tall, pale, good-looking young man, who had been one of her colleagues on a paper in Fleet

Street in her journalistic days. They were like Beatrice and Benedick, and "huddled jest on jest," each one barbed with satire. Did Mr. Luttrell come in the afternoon, she vowed that he had played truant from the office in order to get a free tea. Did he come in the evening, she protested that the world would be dull tomorrow because Mr. Luttrell had not written his prose poem for the news columns of *The Morning*. Frank Luttrell, who was a young man with an old-fashioned gravity beyond his years, inquired very courteously how many new frocks my Lady Kitty had ordered since yesterday afternoon, and how many yards of pearls she had bought lately in Bond Street. That would make a beginning of a nice little quarrel, ending in a unanimous verdict of guilty against Lady Katherine Goldstein, charged with a passion for millinery and jeweller's toys.

Yet all their talk was not so childish, for Bertram Ordish was not only a composer of fairy tales, but a tremendous student of philosophy, and Halliday Wing, the black-and-white artist, knew not only the whole history of painting, but was a prophet of its future, and Edmund Grattan had seen all the big events of modern history, and modern wars up and down the world, and little Frolenko, who besides being a famous violinist, was an intellectual anarchist, had many tales to tell of Russian tyranny in Russian prisons, and spoke an epic poem about the divine spirit of revolution.

Oliver, who had not the knowledge of these journalists and their friends, had to sit silent sometimes, unable to contribute much to the general conversation. At such times a sense of his own ignorance and of his narrow upbringing wounded his self-pride and humiliated him. Yet he comforted himself somewhat by the thought that not all the sons of poor City clerks could bask in the splendour of this handsome room and enjoy the friendship of a lady of quality.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### IN DISGUISE

With Katherine Goldstein's husband Oliver never found himself perfectly at ease. But Rudolf Goldstein was too busy to spend many hours at home, and there were times when Oliver forgot that Lady Katherine had a husband of her own. It occurred to him that she herself sometimes forgot this detail, and that she was glad to forget. He suspected, though without much evidence, that she had made an unhappy marriage, and was utterly out of sympathy with this tall, stolid young man of German parentage, who was the head of a great firm of electrical engineers, founded by old Otto Goldstein, his father, who had been made a baronet for his big donations to the Conservative party funds. He had the appearance and manner of a German officer. His square, florid face, which had a little bristling moustache, was marked on the right cheek by the deep cuts received at Heidelberg from the duelling swords of German students. He bowed stiffly and clicked his heels together when one of his wife's friends was presented to him, and though he spoke perfect English, it was rather guttural. He was an indefatigable worker, and made money quicker than even Katherine could spend it.

Yet he seemed a simple fellow and, apart from electrical engineering, rather slow-witted. When Katherine's literary friends were in the room he took but little part in the conversation, and was evidently perplexed by their bookish slang and ingenious wit. He would sit twisting the few hairs on his upper lip and glancing from one to the other with an amused smile, but was rather restless until he had persuaded one of them to join him in a game of billiards, which he played with scientific skill.

Sometimes, when he came in unexpectedly to the room

where his wife was chatting in her sparkling way with some of those unconventional men like Halliday Wing, Bertram Ordish, and Edmund Grattan, he would stand for a moment in the doorway in a hesitating manner, as though wondering whether he could go back unobserved.

Oliver fancied that he disapproved of his wife's intimacy with these friends, and once or twice, when Katherine looked up and saw her husband, Oliver noticed that the laughing light went out of her eyes and that her face flushed a little, as though conscious of his displeasure. But always she would spring up from the hassock or the hearthrug and go over to him with a word of gladness at his coming, and, putting her hands on his broad shoulders, lift her cheek to him for a kiss. Then he would put an arm round her waist and touch her cheek with his lips, and no man could doubt that he had a sincere love for this beautiful girl who was his wife. But Oliver could not get it out of his head that she was more pleased with the society of other men, and that, in spite of her affectionate caresses to her husband, she was, unconsciously perhaps, rather bored and constrained when he came home to her.

She seemed to have married into a different life to that of her girlhood, and to be filled always with a sentimental regret for the little world to which she had previously belonged; or, rather, she stood between both worlds, and did not quite belong to either of them. She cherished the fondest memories of a Liberty Hall where as a journalist she had lived in lodgings with a comrade who was now Edmund Grattan's wife, and who went by the nick-name of Mother Hubbard. To Mrs. Grattan she said one day in Oliver's presence: "My dear, you are still poor and the wife of a newspaper man. I think I envy you. Do you know how I sigh sometimes for the days when we were both poor together and in the rush and squalor of 'the Street'?"

"Kitty," was Mother Hubbard's answer, "you were never born to be satisfied. How you used to hate poverty! How you yearned for all the beauty that wealth brings! For this, and this!"

She touched Katherine's arm with its diamond bracelet, and her neck with its diamond collar.

"Rudolf works hard to buy you those trinkets. Ungrateful minx!"

"Oh, I know I was born bad. I have a restlessness here." She put her hand to the place where the heart is supposed to be. "I know I could not go back to the old rush and squalor, even with its liberty; and I am wildly extravagant with Rudolf's money. But, all the same, I get no real satisfaction out of all this kind of thing"—she looked round the splendour of her drawing-room. "There is something hollow in my heart that has not been filled up. I have a great hole here." She put her hand to her side again. Then she made a little grimace, and lowered her voice to a whisper, as though about to say something really and desperately wicked. It was, in fact, quite indiscreet.

"Above all, I hate Rudolf's relatives. They are all rich, and all respectable, and all German. I believe Rudy is intimately related with the whole German colony in London. I have never been able to count his cousins. There are the Goldsteins of Grosvenor Street, and the Goldsteins of Bruton Street, and the Berensteins of Sydenham, and the Ecksteins of Hampstead—Steins to the right of us, Steins to the left of us. They are all stuffy and stodgy, and Lutherans of the strictest sect! They regard me as a dangerous mistake in the family, and they weary me till I could weep for weariness."

She put her arms about Mother Hubbard and laid her head on her breast, as though she would weep then and there. But she laughed instead.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Grattan, in her sweet, motherly way; "hush! You must not talk like this before strangers."

"Oh, Oliver is all right," said Lady Kitty. "He is one of the Fleet Street boys. They know that I talk nonsense just for the sake of talking. That is why I love them to come here. Rudolf's relatives always take me seriously."

Oliver, who had not known the lady so long as Mr. Francis Luttrell and others, took her seriously also, and he believed quite honestly that this beautiful girl was the victim of something very like a broken heart.

He was filled with pity for her, and decided that he,

Oliver Lumley, would do all in his power to bring happiness into her life. That decision cost him more time and money than he could afford, led him into an unfortunate quarrel with Charles Hardy, Edmund Grattan, Bertram Ordish, Halliday Wing, and Gilbert Verney—a formidable coalition—and finally to a most unhappy crisis.

Those other men—Hardy and the rest of them—had their work to do, and with some of them it was work which took them away for days together on journalistic adventures or kept them close to Fleet Street. Exciting events happened in English history—a general election, a big murder mystery, an anarchist plot, a frightful railway smash, and a series of mine disasters—so that newspaper men were busy and newspapers raking in revenue. Frolenko was away, fiddling in Paris, and Halliday Wing was painting the portrait of a brewer in the Midlands. This resulted in loneliness for Lady Kitty. Her little court of favourites was broken up for a time. She had only the German relatives left—and Oliver Lumley.

Oliver, did not, of course, deal with anything so stupid as facts, but wrote only the purest fiction, and that, as we have seen, late at night. He, therefore, was the one man left to console a rather disconsolate lady. It put him into a position of advantage over the other men, who, ordinarily, left him in the shade and made him feel an outsider. He was not slow to profit by it.

Often he would go to Pont Street in the afternoon and find himself quite alone with Lady Goldstein. Nobody but Smithers the footman interrupted their conversation, and then it was only to bring in the tea-things. For an hour or two they would talk together in that quiet tone of voice, and with those little silences, which show that mere acquaintanceship has passed into friendship.

Katherine Goldstein, in one of her remarkable gowns (Oliver had seldom seen her in the same one twice) tucked up a little, would sit with her feet on the fender rail (she insisted on having a fire even on a bright spring day), and with her hands clasped in her lap, would talk of her adventures as a journalist, her " scoops " as she called them —there was one famous one in connection with a Bourbon wedding—and would get excited and laugh with

ripples of merriment at the old fun and rattle and rush of the newspaper, now dead, where formerly she used to work. Sometimes after these anecdotes she would sigh and say "Well, it is all over now!" as though there could be no more interest in life for her.

In these moods of pessimism and regret, when there was a rather tired, wistful look in her eyes, Oliver found her most charming and most alluring. He would speak words of sympathy and consolation, or try to cheer her up by jokes which he found he could make more easily and more wittily when her other friends were not present. Sometimes she jeered at him in a pretty, mocking way for his obvious attempts to brighten her.

"For Heaven's sake, my dear child, do not imagine that I am suffering from heart-sickness. I have everything the heart of woman could wish—except one thing."

She did not say what that one thing was, but Oliver believed that she grieved at being childless. She would have made a beautiful mother, he thought.

Once he angered her, and was startled when she turned on him with flushed cheeks and a sharp rebuke. It was when he made some slight jest about Rudolf Goldstein. He had not meant to be deliberately disparaging, but he regretted having spoken the words.

"You forget yourself," she said. "Rudolf is my husband."

He smoothed over his unlucky speech, though afterwards he excused himself to his own conscience by remembering that Lady Kitty had often spoken rather freely herself about her German baronet, as she called him.

However, she forgot and forgave his slip, and that afternoon he really did succeed in raising her spirits, which had been down in the dumps, by suggesting that she should write a novel.

The idea caught hold of her. For the next week or two she talked incessantly of "plots" and "situations" to Oliver. Very good they were, in Oliver's opinion, and he found himself wishing that such ideas would jump so quickly into his own brain. So he told her one afternoon in a moment of candour, and then at once she abandoned the idea of a novel, and insisted upon his working out some of her ideas as short stories.

"I shall never have the pluck or the industry to write a novel. You see I have no spur. Rudolf makes me wallow in luxury. It is only poor people who may write good things."

"Then I must write good things,' said Oliver. "For I am very poor!"

Lady Goldstein looked at him with curious eyes, as though to test the truth of his words.

"I don't suppose you are indecently rich like I am—thanks to Rudolf. But I don't think you are very poor. You make a good bit by your writing, don't you?"

Oliver was tempted to pour out his troubles into her lap, to confess that he was so overwhelmed in debt that he was becoming seriously scared, that he owed money to Charles Hardy, and to several of his other friends, and that he was weeks behind with his landlady's rent.

But her belief in his success flattered him. He was glad of her good opinion of him as a literary man, and he did not care to disillusion her. So he answered lightly, "Oh, I do pretty well. I earn my bread-and-butter, and sometimes can afford a little jam!"

"How good the jam is when one is earning the bread-and-butter!" said Katherine Goldstein.

She kept to her point about his writing up some of the plots she had invented, and she was tremendously pleased when he handed her three of them neatly typed. They had worked our rather well, and again Kitty was tremendously pleased when they were accepted by one of the magazines.

"I must pay you half the proceeds," said Oliver. "This has been a collaboration."

Katherine protested that this was all nonsense, and that he had a right to every halfpenny of the money. But she yielded when he said that he would "stand treat" out of what was morally and legally due to her. She did not remember that the money would not be actually in his pocket until the stories were printed, and Oliver, who always forestalled his earnings, did not give a thought to this side of the business.

So Oliver "stood treat," and Katherine was like a schoolgirl in her desire for a little fun and a little

adventure when he came to fetch her one evening to a Fancy Dress Ball at the Artists' Club.

Oliver was in the costume of David Garrick. It cost him a guinea at Clarkson's, and a big mirror had told him that he looked a gallant fellow in it. His finely-cut, clean-shaven face, with his black brows and dark eyes, looked very striking under the white peruke. The sky-blue satin coat, the long waistcoat with little pink roses embroidered on it, the knee breeches and white silk stockings, the frill at the throat, the ruffles at the wrist, and the high-heeled shoes with silver buckles became him wonderfully. As he jumped out of the hansom cab in which he had driven from the costumier's, he felt like a fairy prince coming to fetch Cinderella to the ball.

The footman at the door grinned at him deferentially, and gave a little cough behind his hand. In the drawing-room Oliver paced up and down and bowed to his own image with his hand on his heart in an oval mirror on the wall. He wished that he might always wear such clothes in the streets of London, so drab and ugly now with the hideous dress of modern men. From a Chippendale writing-table he picked up another mirror, and was admiring the effect of the black patch upon his left cheek when Katherine Goldstein came in.

He dropped the glass with a little clatter on the table, and then bowed very low and humbly before a beautiful lady who seemed to have stepped straight from a painting by George Morland. She wore a white muslin frock with a high waist and puffed sleeves, and a big pink sash. The dress was cut low at the neck, and round her throat was a circlet of pearls. Her fair hair was uncoiled, and fell in ringlets about her face, from beneath a broad straw hat with a white ostrich feather. She had put a touch of colour upon her cheeks, and, with her bright brown eyes and smiling lips, she was just the image of that famous portrait of "Delia in Town" of which a coloured mezzotint hung over the rosewood piano, with its legend in flowing script:

> "With beauteous form and sparkling Eyes
> To Town the rural Delia flies,
> List, gentle Nymph, to what I say,
> Let Prudence guard thee on thy way.

Alas! too many a simple Maid
Hath been by cruel Arts betray'd,
Then quickly seek thy native Grove,
The seat of Innocence and Love."

She dropped a deep curtsey to Oliver, and sank for a moment between the white billows of her gown. Then she rose with a deeper colour in her cheeks, and, holding her hand to him, said :

" My lord, you look rarely well to-night, i' faith ! "

Oliver permitted himself to touch her hand with his lips.

" Lady, you put a spell upon my eyes."

Then they both laughed, and stood looking at each other with just a trace of self-consciousness.

" You are wonderful ! " said Oliver. " What does your husband think of the vision ? "

" Rudolf is glumpy," said Katherine. " This ' play-acting,' as he calls it, has stirred up all his Lutheran instincts. He went off to a public dinner rather huffy with me, poor boy."

For a moment she looked as if she half repented of her adventure. But when Smithers came into the room and said, " The car is ready, my lady," the look of sad and sombre reproach with which he regarded her restored her good spirits, and, putting her hand lightly on Oliver's arm, and holding up her full white gown, she went out, laughing, to the great car with its glaring head-lights.

As they drove to the Artists' Ball Oliver's knees were half covered with the fluffy waves of her muslin frock, and her fair ringlets strayed upon his shoulders. She had used some beautiful perfume of roses, and the subtle odour of it stole into his senses. It seemed to him wonderful—like the magic of the " Arabian Nights "—that he should be driving in this way, and dressed as a beau of olden times, with a lady of quality by his side.

For a moment he had a vision of the parlour at home in Rosemary Avenue, where his mother sat mending socks, and his father reading in the horsehair armchair with its broken springs, and Galatea just returning from the office with a headache and a bad temper. He had got away from all that. He was in a new and brighter world. He remembered that a week ago he had had a

postcard from Galatea—" Is there any possible chance of your getting tickets for the Artists' Ball ? I would give my heart to go. I hear that Mr. Hardy will be there." So she had written, and he had wondered then how she knew about the ball and about Hardy's proposal to go. He had written back a postcard—" Impossible, my dear," but his sister's request had put the idea into his head of taking Lady Goldstein. Poor Galatea ! She was the Cinderella of the family.

" A penny for your thoughts ! " said Katherine, and Oliver, giving a start, smiled and said :

" I was thinking how beautiful you look in that sweet, old-fashioned dress."

It was not strictly true, but a charming compliment, and Katherine was pleased with it.

" David Garrick would be flattered by his living portrait. He was an ugly little man."

She had returned the compliment prettily.

## CHAPTER XIX

### A PAGEANT OF HISTORY

As they drove up to the entrance-way of Covent Garden Opera House they were held up in a block of carriages. Through the windows they could see the flashing lamps of many motor-cars. From some of them which had come to a standstill there jumped down strange figures like the characters of a fairy world, little Columbines, as light as puff-balls, scarlet devils, white-faced pierrots, a knight in armour, a Jacobite gentleman, a white pig with a curly tail, two Spanish dancers and a group of Red Indians in war-paint, with their squaws.

"Let us get down too," said Katherine; "it will save time, and I am longing to see the wonderful picture inside."

Oliver got out of the car, and gave his hand to Katherine. She held to his arm as they made their way, a strange company, into the great hall.

Then Katherine held her breath for a moment, and clasped her hands, and said, "Oh, wonderful!"

It was certainly a brilliant pageant beneath the glittering candelabra, which shed pools of soft light upon the great polished floor. Out of the coloured picture-books of history had stepped living figures—the Kings and Queens of England, Saxon warriors, ladies of Authur's court, gentlemen of France, of those days when the Three Musketeers swaggered arm-in-arm through the narrow streets of old Paris, Italian nobles of the Renaissance, like Benedick and Mercutio, Elizabethans, like Robin Devereux, Spenser, and Sidney, the wits and bloods of the Queen Anne coffee-taverns, Georgian dandies, and Early Victorian ladies in the flowered gowns of our great-grandmothers.

And out of a world of dreams, fantastic, beautiful, hideous, alluring, had come many fairy characters, such as children see between sleep and waking—the heroes and heroines of their nursery rhymes, the gorgeous

figures of the " Arabian Nights," flower-fairies, demons, wood-nymphs, and evil genii, animals with speaking voices, and chanticleers that crowed before the dawn.

The wardrobe of all nations had been ransacked, and here were Dutch girls with their striped petticoats and wooden shoes, Dutch fishermen with their monstrous breeches, Bohemian gipsies with tambourines, Italian contadine, Spanish dancers and Spanish toreadors, Swiss peasants, Chinese, and Arabs—a human phantasmagoria.

Oliver and Katherine threaded their way through this many-coloured throng. Katherine was excited now, and at every moment she would touch Oliver's arm and say, " Look, how absurd ! how amusing ! " or turn with a gay laugh to stare at some ill-assorted couple. Her sense of humour was stirred by the sight of Henry VIII with a white-robed nun on his arm ; by the devil pacing across the floor with a pretty pierrette in her fluffy white skirt and long white stockings ; by Louis XIV teasing the love-locks of a Stuart cavalier ; by Marie Antoinette hand-in-hand with a Prehistoric Peep.

Oliver and Katherine did not escape comment. Oliver was conscious that many of these dream-figures turned to look at him. A pretty girl dressed as Bo-peep gave him the full admiration of her eyes, then, turning to Boy Blue, said, " My word ! what a handsome young man ! "

An Elizabethan, with a spade beard and jewelled doublet, touched him on the arm and said, " Well done, Roly ! You look perfect ! "

Oliver stared at this man, who was surely the ghost of Sir Walter Raleigh in his spring-time. Something about the eyes seemed familiar to him, but he could not identify his friend. Probably it was one of the Wastrels nobly disguised.

A girl's voice over his shoulder said, " Why, there is Lady Goldstein ! " He looked round to see a pair of laughing eyes above the veil of a Turkish lady. She tripped away on the arm of a white-clad clown.

Several times he heard Lady Goldstein's name mentioned, and every time he had a little thrill of pride as being a cavalier of this distinguished lady. Many mysterious people bowed to her, or stopped to pay homage to her. There was a young lancelot in shining

armour of gold who bowed low before her, and lifted her hand to his lips.

"You here, Kitty!"

It was Mr. Francis Luttrell, the young journalist who came to Pont Street. He looked round at Oliver and nodded to him rather curtly.

Lady Goldstein blushed a little.

"I did not know you were coming, Frank. You look a very parfit, gentil knight. Where is your fair lady?"

"I had a dream-lady once," said Sir Lancelot, "but I was poor, and she became a queen. So I wander alone in the world."

Lady Goldstein's blush was deeper now.

"Hush, Frank. Do not talk nonsense. . . . You might have told me you were coming."

"I did not know until this evening. I am here on duty. The office pays for this fine suit."

Oliver was glad when he moved away. He had an uneasy feeling that between Katherine Goldstein and Francis Luttrell there was the memory of an old love-story. He saw him again in the evening. In his golden armour he was sitting outside the throng, writing hard, with a note-book on his knee-piece.

The hours passed by swiftly. Several times Oliver lost Lady Katherine. She was taken away from him by a Cardinal in his long silken robes, which swept the floor; by a Falstaff, in whom he recognised Bertram Ordish; by a Henry of Navarre, who was Halliday Wing the artist—he was taking a holiday from his brewer in the Midlands; by a jester with jingling bells on his cap; by many other splendid or fantastic people, who were all astonished and delighted to find Katherine at the ball, and, as it seemed to Oliver, rather surprised that she should have come without her husband and with this young David Garrick, who could not dance.

That was Oliver's tragedy. He had to stand apart on the outside circle of the gay crowd because his education at Denmark Hill had not included dancing-lessons. He cursed his fate, which did not allow him to take Lady Goldstein's hand and lead her into the heart of the revels. Silent and moody, with folded arms, he leant against a pillar, his eyes rather dizzy with all this swift movement

of colour, his senses swimming in the heat, in the mingled scents, in the swish of women's skirts, the jingle and clatter of words, shoulder-knots, bells, false jewels, and metal ornaments, in the laughter and little cries, and the murmur of many voices.

But always he watched for Katherine Goldstein's muslin frock, and for her big straw hat, and for her fair ringlets, as she came dancing round the room. He caught swift glances of her appearing for a moment among the great crowd of dancers, and then disappearing in the human tide. Once her eyes flashed into his as she glided swiftly past. She seemed to be laughing at his solemn face. He felt out in the cold. There were moments when he accused her in his heart of outrageous cruelty. Had he not paid for her ticket and brought her to the ball? Why should these other men pluck her away from him? Yet he recovered his spirits when he regained her during the supper hour. She was flushed and tired, but still excited.

"I crave for an ice!"

He fetched her one quickly, and they sat at a little table and watched the procession of people passing them. She took an endless interest in their costumes.

"Strange, how we like to dress up! We are all children at heart."

"It is the game of make-believe," said Oliver. "The best thing in life. Here to-night we are princes, and nobles, and merry clowns, and columbines. To-morrow we are just ordinary mortals in a drab world."

He touched her wine-glass with his own.

"To the spirit of divine youth! Let us play the game to-night, and laugh while we may. If only the dream would last without a waking!"

She laughed at him then.

"You are a funny boy, Roly! Anyone would think you were living on the brink of a tragedy."

She touched his hand as it rested on the table, and fingered his ruffles.

"It was good of you to bring me here. It has taken me back to the old days before I was the wife of a rich man. I seem a girl again to-night!"

She was not much more than a girl at any time, and half an hour later she was with a group of mediæval

knights and ladies in a box on the upper tier, flinging confetti to the crowd below.

Oliver had lost her in the throng. He went in quest of her rather angrily. He almost believed that she had given him the slip intentionally. He was walking down a corridor with searching sombre eyes, when a light hand was laid on his arm, and a girl's voice said, "We have been looking for you everywhere, Roly!"

He saw a tall girl dressed in a flowered muslin gown, with a lace cap on her hair. For a moment he did not recognise her. Then he was amazed.

"Galatea!"

It was his sister, and she laughed at his surprise. "You see Cinderella has come to the ball after all!"

"How on earth did you get here?" asked Oliver. Then he saw that the Persian Prince by her side was Charles Hardy.

"I had the pleasure of taking tea with your father yesterday," said the Persian Prince, "and your sister was good enough to accept my invitation to the ball. By good luck I had two tickets."

He was magnificent in a long robe of shot silk, and his face was stained a golden-brown. He handled a long carved scimitar with a painted hilt, and he looked at Oliver with a whimsical smile, as though pleased with his astonishment.

Oliver was not only astonished. He was annoyed. He could not understand why Hardy should have gone to the house in Denmark Hill without saying anything to him about it. And it did not seem to him quite right that his sister should come with him alone to the ball. He was not quite sure whether Hardy was a fit companion for Galatea.

"Did the mater allow you to come? It is rather unconventional, isn't it?"

"My dear Roly," said Galatea very calmly, "I am not a child. Please don't be absurd."

"I hear you have come with Katherine Goldstein," said Hardy. "Is that strictly according to convention?"

He gave a straight look at Oliver, and for some reason Olivers eyes dropped before that gaze, and a slight colour mounted into his cheeks.

"Anyhow," he said to Galatea, "I am very glad you are here. I simply couldn't afford another ticket. . . . What do you think of it all?"

"I cannot think!" said Galatea. "I am bewildered by the joy of it."

A party of Red Indian braves came flourishing tomahawks down the corridor, and shouting a war-song of "Hu! hu! hu!" They were lusting for the blood of the Prehistoric Peep, who was flying from them. Laughter rang out on either side, people scattered down the passages, little screams came from the bevy of pretty girls—the beauties of the nations—as though they were scared by those painted savages with their tomahawks. A new party of revellers came rushing by, and when they had passed Oliver looked round for Hardy and his sister, but they had disappeared.

It was three o'clock in the morning before the attendants under the portico of the Opera House shouted, "Lady Goldstein's carriage!" It was twenty-past three before Oliver stood with Katherine on the steps of 31, Pont Street. Smithers opened the door, stifling a yawn.

"Well, good-night!" said Oliver. "I shall never forget this evening."

"Come in for a glass of hot milk and some biscuits, it seems ages since we had anything to eat. I am starving."

She caught him by the wrist and led him inside.

"Smithers, if you are faithful to me, you have not forgotten my request about the milk."

"My lady, it is not my habit to forget."

Lady Goldstein smiled at his imperturbable conceit, and went into the dining-room with Oliver. Then she uttered a sharp exclamation.

"What, Rudy, haven't you gone to bed?"

Rudolf Goldstein was standing with his back to the fire, with his hands behind his back, very stiffly.

"I do not care to go to bed when my wife stays out so late with comparative strangers."

"Comparative fiddlesticks, my dear!" said Katherine very coolly, but with a sudden pursing up of her lips.

She turned to Oliver.

"We have had a lovely time, haven't we?"

"Ripping!" said Oliver.

But he lowered his eyes before the hard, unfriendly looks of Katherine's husband.

"I wished you had been there, Rudy!" said Katherine, going up to her husband, and putting her hand upon his shoulder.

He held himself very straight, and did not bend to kiss his beautiful wife.

"If you had thought of me at all," he said gravely, "I think you would have come back earlier, Katherine. I have been anxious."

"Oh, now your Lutheran instincts are coming out!" said Katherine.

He did not answer that shaft of satire.

He stood twisting his little fair moustache while Katherine served Oliver with hot milk and biscuits. She chatted gaily, but Oliver could see that she was conscious of her husband's silence, and annoyed by it.

"As you are so tired, Rudolf, perhaps you had better go to bed."

"I am not tired. I will wait until Mr. Oliver Lumley has satisfied his hunger."

Katherine laughed very merrily at that.

"What a German way of expressing a hint! Rudy, don't be so absurd!"

Needless to say Oliver did not linger over that refreshment. He took his leave quickly now, and after Katherine had given him her hand and said, "Thanks again, Roly, for a beautiful evening," he said, "Good night, sir," to Rudolf Goldstein.

Katherine's husband nodded to him, and it was Smithers who showed him out.

As he stood in Pont Street looking up and down for a cab, the sky was just faintly flushed with the appearance of dawn. A moist wind flapped his silk coat. He felt as if he were dressed in tissue paper. He had to walk home to Westminster as David Garrick, and the policemen on their beats grinned at him.

On the way his mind dwelt upon the details of Katherine's home-coming in Pont Street. He was convinced now that she was the victim of a miserable marriage.

"Poor little lady!" he said. "I wish to Heaven I could comfort her!"

## CHAPTER XX

### AN ACCUSATION

Oliver had several surprises during the next few weeks which left him with a rather chastened spirit. The first of these was when he paid a flying visit home and found Charles Hardy down on his knees on the hearth-rug toasting muffins with Galatea.

Galatea's cheeks were red-hot, and when Hardy burned one side of a muffin as black as his hat she rebuked him with a little slap on the arm, which showed that they had reached the stage of familiarity and friendship, though without contempt.

Oliver was astonished indeed to find how much Hardy was at home in Rosemary Avenue. He took possession of that armchair which had been Oliver's by right of tenure, the tabby cat curled itself up in his lap as though he were a tried and trusted friend, and Horace—never quick to cultivate an acquaintance—called him "old man."

It appeared that after the night at the theatre Mrs. Lumley, at Galatea's prompting, had invited him to tea (they found his address in the telephone book), and he had not only accepted, but came, and stayed for several hours. They had had a musical evening, for Hardy had a good baritone voice, and sang "Sally in Our Alley." "Tom Bowling," "Kathleen Mavourneen" and other songs from a shilling album, to Galatea's accompaniment.

Since that evening he had called three times after supper, and into the small household of Denmark Hill he brought a new spirit of happiness and gaiety. He told the most interesting stories of newspaper life; he had a fund of quiet humour which delighted them all, and he behaved with the greatest courtesy to Mr. Lumley, even listening with patience to his views on the political situation from a Conservative point of view.

But to all of them the object of his visit was clear enough. His tenderness to Galatea was not concealed. It was to her that he turned most often when he was

telling his stories. He was always quick to spring to the door when she went out into the kitchen ; he had even insisted upon helping her " wash up " the supper things one night when the maid had gone out.

That last act of chivalry endeared him to them. Mr. Lumley quoted the old proverb " Noblesse oblige," but Mrs. Lumley vowed that she would never have believed in such humility by a distinguished young man unless she had seen it with her own eyes.

She angered her husband very much one night by stating her belief that Mr. Hardy was in love with Galatea. He rebuked her severely for indulging in such foolish ideas and forbade her to mention such a thing to the girl herself. She accepted the rebuke more meekly than was her wont, guessing intuitively that her husband had exactly the same idea, though he did not dare to express his hope. She lay awake at night hoping and praying that Galatea might win such an admirable and well-to-do young man, and her thoughts flew so fast that she forgot that Charles Hardy had spent only three evenings with them.

Galatea herself seemed to have acquired a new beauty. There was a softer light in her eyes and a richer colour in her cheeks. She was conscious that her family were watching her, and often she blushed to find their eyes upon her, or to see a smile about their lips when Hardy's name was mentioned.

Oliver was disconcerted to find his friend so securely established at home. For the first time in his life he played second fiddle in that barely furnished parlour. The attentions of his father and mother were all for Hardy. His conversation, not Oliver's, interested them most deeply. Even Horace said a blunt word of displeasure when Oliver interrupted one of Hardy's stories by an ironical laugh, as though he were pulling the long bow.

Oliver became moody and silent, and then savage, because his moodiness and silence were quite unobserved by his people, and therefore had no effect upon their spirits. He began to feel strangely jealous of this young man, whose lightest word would arouse the gaiety of the family group. He had a miserable sense of being neglected by those who had admired him as their hero, and who had been abashed by his social success.

Then later in the evening a thunderbolt fell upon him. Hardy had gone, and Mr. Lumley beckoned his son into the little room he called his study. He seemed somewhat embarrassed, as though he had something unpleasant to say, and Oliver had an instinctive feeling that he was about to discuss financial matters.

He was right. After some hesitation, his father explained that he was under the painful necessity of withdrawing his allowance of a pound a week.

"But, my dear guv'nor," said Oliver, more startled than he cared to show.

"It is like this," said his father, "my chiefs have taken an objection to my earning so much overtime. They say it is not fair on the younger men. They advise me, for my own sake, to return to my ordinary hours."

"And that means?"

"That means I cannot possibly make those monthly advances to you."

Oliver was silent. He knew that this withdrawal would be a serious thing for him.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. Lumley, speaking nervously now, "I was wondering, Roly, whether you could see your way to pay me back some of the money. I have to stint and scrape to make both ends meet. It is telling on my health, and it is not fair on your mother and sister. Galatea may need a few pretty frocks to wear now that she is—er—getting into good society."

"Good Lord!" said Oliver, laughing scornfully, "you are not counting upon Hardy's flirtation, I hope!"

He made use of this as a safety valve for his annoyance, and he saw with satisfaction that his father was angered.

"I made no reference to Mr. Hardy," he said with dignity. "Nor do I like the word 'flirtation!' Mr. Hardy is a perfectly honourable young man."

"So are they all—all honourable men!"

"I trust you know nothing against his character, for dear Galatea's sake."

Mr. Lumley was anxious now; and Oliver alarmed him when he said that Hardy was a weak, amiable fellow, whose vanity was stirred by any woman's admiration.

"At the Wastrels," said Oliver, "they laugh at his insufferable conceit."

Mr. Lumley waved the matter on one side, as though it were not worth discussing.

"Let us get back to business," he said.

There was rather a rasping tone in his voice. To Oliver's astonishment, his father spoke with a bitterness and sarcasm which were quite unprecedented in his character. Evidently he had been brooding over things, and had worked himself up into a state of excitement. For the first time in his life Oliver caught a glimpse of the struggle, and disappointment, and revolt in his father's heart.

He spoke of his long years of toil for his family, of his mean little economies, of his daily drudgery at the office. He had never been able to afford those things which would have relieved the monotony of life for himself and his wife. They had devoted themselves to the children, and now they looked for some reward. Oliver had promised them help. They had expected him to contribute to the household expenses, to relieve them of the haunting fear of debt, and to lighten the burden of their declining years. But what had happened? None of his promises had been fulfilled. On the contrary, he had made heavy demands upon their poor income. He had borrowed money continually, not only from his father, but from Horace. Yet he himself was living a life of ease and luxury. He was enjoying himself in high society.

"It is not fair!" said Mr. Lumley. "It is unfair to your mother, to Horace, to Galatea, and to me. As a successful literary man you have no right to lay this burden upon us."

"Successful literary man!" said Oliver. "Good God! I am a dead failure."

It was the first time that he had made a confession of failure. And he saw, with a sense of bitter irony, that his father did not believe him. He had talked so often of success that now his father took it for granted.

Oliver was pale. His dark eyes had a smouldering fire in them.

"Who has been talking to you?" he asked, almost violently. "Who has been putting all these ideas into your head? I believe Hardy has been meddling with my affairs. By the Lord, if he has, I will break his head!"

"You are entirely in error," said Mr. Lumley. "Mr.

Hardy does not discuss you in any way. The truth about you gradually dawned upon me."

"The truth about me?"

"The truth about your selfishness."

Oliver rose from his chair, and a flame of colour swept into his face.

"By Heaven, I did not think my own father would ever speak to me like this!"

"It has not been easy. It was only the sternest sense of duty that impelled me to do so."

A silence fell upon them, and then Oliver said, "It is late. I will go."

He went into the next room, and said good-night to his mother. She guessed that something unpleasant had been happening between her husband and son. She kissed him upon the forehead, and said, "What is the matter, my dearest boy?" He did not answer, but went out into the hall and put on his things. His father still stayed in his study. Horace came out into the passage, and shut the dining-room door.

"I say, old man, could you possibly return a little of that brass I have lent you from time to time? I am frightfully shabby and as hard up as usual. If it wouldn't be troubling you . . ."

"What, you, too?" said Oliver. "I believe there is a damned conspiracy against me!"

He went out of the house without another word, and slammed the front door after him.

He walked to the tramcar with a white face and burning eyes. It seemed to him that his family had turned against him. After all his kindness to them, after all his promises, and his generous intentions, they had become hostile to him. He could not understand it. He honestly believed that Hardy must have poisoned their hearts against him.

"By the Lord, I will be even with him!" he muttered; but on the way home a sense of misery settled down upon him. His father had spoken outrageous things. He had accused him of selfishness—though if there were any fault with him, he thought, it was his almost reckless desire to do good to other people. Man as he was, he could have shed weak tears at this injustice.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE CHARITY OF WOMEN

OLIVER had a great need of sympathy, and he turned with his trouble to that fount which never fails—at least, hardly ever—the heart of woman.

He wrote a long letter to Virginia Garland, that lady in the country from whom he still received little remembrances—the first snowdrops that had poked up their heads in the January garden, and afterwards the first violets, a book of poems by Francis Thompson, a small engraving of Raphael's "Madonna and Child," a pot of cream, a basket of primroses lined with moss.

The letter was written late at night, and it seemed as though he dipped his pen in tears. He confessed that his struggle with poverty was wearing him down. It was turning his blood to water. It was robbing him of his inspiration. Always the wolf sat upon his door-step with open jaws. He was bitter with the folly of the time. Only the impostors of literature obtained recognition, the sensationalists and the slap-dash humbugs of shoddy trash. The men who took their art seriously, who went to life for their models and to the old moralities for their ideals, were ignored or flouted.

He hinted that for Art's sake he had lost the affection of his family and friends. If only he had gone into business, with money for his god, he would have been honoured and loved. But because he had given his soul to higher things he was despised and wounded.

Worse than all was the feeling of staleness and weariness that was creeping over him and deadening his sensibilities. He felt that he must escape—escape from this cruel, callous London and bathe his spirit in the pure springs of some fairer, quieter spot.

It was a rather good letter, and Oliver admired it when he read it through to himself. He was moved to self-pity by the analytical study of his own misery.

Two days later he had an answer from Miss Virginia Garland. He opened the letter eagerly, and held the envelope upside down, in case there should be an enclosure. The thought had jumped into his brain that perhaps Miss Garland might have sent another gift. He was mistaken. Her words were full of womanly sympathy. She thanked him for telling her of his unhappiness, and she begged him to believe that his confidence would be respected. She could say only one word to him—courage. She would say it now. "Courage!" Poverty must be hard to bear when it became wearing to the nerves and spirits, most hard when it alienated the affections of those most dearly loved. But genius had always flourished best in poorest soil. All the struggles of a literary man, all his disappointments, must surely bring him closer to the great truth of life and make his work strike deeper down into the heart of truth.

It was a short and serious letter, but the last paragraph had a charming simplicity.

*Can you not get away from town as you suggest, to a quiet spot? Here in the country living is very cheap. I know a cottage—a hundred feet from my garden wall—as pretty as a picture in a fairy tale. It is only six shillings a week, and my kitchen gardens and poultry runs are so well-stocked that I hardly know what to do with the produce of them. Perhaps in such a cottage you might write your great novel.*

Oliver was touched by that. Those lines conjured up a pleasant vision. Even to have Virginia Garland for a next-door neighbour would surely be delightful. Supposing he were to set off on that adventure, and shake the dust of London from his shoes? For a moment he was tempted; but the face of Katherine Goldstein came between his eyes and the picture of that country cottage.

There were other faces, too, which he would miss if he confessed to failure and tramped off to the countryside. He would miss the laughing faces of Livvy and Doris, those two actress girls who were always ready for a little fun and frolic with him, and all the boys at the Wastrels,

and all those people up and down the streets of London who had given him their friendship and their smiles.

He went to Livvy O'Brien and Doris Fortescue for sympathy, and afternoon tea, in the Kennington Road. They gave him the tea willingly enough, and also some cake (made by the landlady, and rather heavy), but they pretended to hesitate about the sympathy.

Oliver began with a lurid account of his woes.

"I am stony-broke," he said; "I am absolutely up a gum-tree, my dear girls. There will be no more of those nice little dinners in Soho, Livvy. I can't afford to bring you any more boxes of chocolates, Doris. That delightful week-end at Brighton must not be repeated, dear children. It cost too much money, and I must effect rigid economies. No more taxis. No more Sunday afternoon concerts. I have nothing to give, but only a lot to ask. I want your comradeship, your laughter, and the goodness of your hearts."

The speech was not received in the manner he had expected. The girls did not burst into tears, or throw their arms about his neck.

"Goodness gracious!" said Livvy. "All this is very serious."

She turned to Doris.

"Doris, darling, we shall have to be very careful about this young man. We shall have to reconsider our position towards him."

"We shall, indeed!" said Doris. "No more dinners in Soho, did you say, Roly?"

"No more dinners in Soho!" said Oliver gloomily.

"No more boxes of chocolates. Did I understand you to say that, Roly?" said Doris.

"That is so," said Oliver, still more gloomily.

"Not another week-end at Brighton?" asked Livvy with an air of anxiety.

"Absolutely not," said Oliver.

"No more taxis? No more Sunday concerts?"

"You speak the truth," said Oliver.

"Sure, then," said Livvy, in the absurd brogue which she sometimes affected, "what is the good of this young man at all, at all?"

"What is there to be got out of him?" asked Doris.

"Why have we wasted so much of our time and affection upon this impecunious young fellow?" asked Doris.

"Where is the exalted marriage which one of us hoped to make with him?" asked Livvy.

"Our hopes are dashed!" said Doris.

"We are undone!" said Livvy.

Oliver looked very miserable indeed. He did not know how much truth there was in the words of these two girls who had been good chums with him. They both looked at him searchingly, and they both laughed and laughed.

"What a boy it is!" said Livvy, wiping a little tear out of one of her eyes. "He has taken us quite seriously."

She went over to Oliver, and took both his hands and looked up into his face.

"Are you really hard up, Roly?"

"Really and truly!"

"I'm sorry!" said Livvy.

"So am I," said Doris, eating a bit of cake. "Beastly sorry."

"You have been a real good pal to us," said Livvy.

"I'm glad," said Oliver. "I am glad it will make no difference to you because I can't bring pretty things and give you any more fun for a little time."

"So am I," said Doris, still eating the cake. "Beastly glad." She corrected herself, and said, "Beastly sorry, I mean. At least, I don't know what the dickens I do mean."

Livvy released Oliver's hand and went to the chest of drawers and brought out a bag of green silk.

"Doris," she said, "how much have you got in that cash box of yours?"

"Two pounds eight and a penny."

Livvy opened the bag and poured on to the table a number of silver pieces and a few bits of gold.

"Five pounds odd," she said. Then she looked up at Oliver.

"If that is any good to you, Roly, it is yours. Now you are not going to be proud and haughty?"

"Good God!" said Oliver. "Good God!"

"I stand in with Livvy," said Doris, "though I shall have to give up eating cake."

"My dear girls! You are the best in the world. But I wouldn't dream of touching a penny of your little earnings. I did not come here to beg."

"Now, didn't I say he was proud and haughty!" said Livvy, glaring at him. "What ridiculous nonsense! As if friends should not help each other when they're down on their luck!"

Oliver would not touch the money, but his heart was softened more than he could remember, and when he said good-bye that night he caught hold of Livvy's hands and kissed her.

"You are a brick!" he said, "a perfect brick!"

She blushed furiously, and said that he really must not do that again or she would be very angry with him. Doris said that if he tried the same thing on with her she would give him "what for."

But they were both laughing when he went down the stairs from their lodgings, and the next morning when Oliver opened his letters there was one from which fell five postal orders for a pound each. They were wrapped round in a sheet of note-paper on which were the words, "With love from Livvy and Doris."

Oliver did not send back the money. He used it to pay Mrs. Trant, his landlady, a sum on account of sixteen weeks' lodging and washing. It mollified her a little and checked her threats of immediate eviction.

## CHAPTER XXII

### GAY ADVENTURES

We have seen that in the troubles clouding his young career Mr. Oliver Lumley turned for comfort to his women friends and received from them consolation and charity.

But he did not forget his resolution to brighten the spirits of a lady whose heart was bleeding, he believed, in a most unhappy home-life. He became the knight-errant and faithful servant of Katherine, Lady Goldstein. He devised merry adventures for her, and she, glad to escape from what she called the Dismal Dumps (these evil creatures sometimes waylaid her when she was left alone), accepted his invitations willingly.

For a lady living in Pont Street (with a front door guarded by Smithers) and dressing in most expensive frocks, and related by marriage to many wealthy Germans residing in Sydenham and Hampstead, in big white houses in which propriety sat enthroned, these expeditions with Oliver were rather strange and somewhat indiscreet.

Their visit to the Tower, however, was quite harmless. There was no reason why Lady Goldstein should not, as she did, conjure up the fair ghosts of history whose heads had been chopped off within those grim old walls, pretend to be Lady Jane Grey in the Bloody Tower, as Queen Elizabeth order the instant decapitation of Oliver Lumley on a charge of high treason, and dab her eyes with a lace pocket-handkerchief in the Church of St. Peter ad Vincula at the thought of all the gallant men and beautiful women whose dust lay beneath those stones.

No soul alive could take exception to their visits to the National Gallery, where Katherine and Oliver stood entranced before the glories of Raphael and Titian, or, on students' days, laughed with suppressed merriment at

the long-haired boys, the red-haired ladies in blue pinafores, the old ladies and gentlemen, who, on high ladders, made careful copies of little masterpieces and talked Art while they munched their sandwiches in the luncheon hour.

But things began to go a little too far when Lady Goldstein went with Oliver one evening to Barnet Fair, and in the glare of the paraffin lamps, in the raucous din of clanging bells, steam trumpets, mouth-organs, and hoarse-voiced mirth in a jostling, eddying crowd of costers, East-End Jews, horsedealers, gipsies, tramps, and thieves, wandered from booth to booth, and watched this drama of low-class humanity.

Even Oliver became rather nervous.

"This is too rough," he said. "I think we had better get out of it."

Katherine had her hand tucked through his arm and kept close to him, but she would not hear of going until she had seen all the sights.

"It has been the one ambition of my life," she said, "to see a Fat Lady. I have never had the pluck to go through the curtain. . . . Don't be in a hurry to go, Roly. This is life. This is the Real Thing. I am tremendously interested. We don't do this sort of thing in Pont Street."

"What would Smithers say if he saw us!"

They both laughed like children who were playing truant and enjoying stolen fruits.

Strange smells were wafted to their nostrils, smells not pleasant, one would imagine, to a lady of quality. They came from fried-fish stalls, from oil lamps, from onions frizzling in boiling grease. There was the subtle, acid smell of humanity in damp and dirty clothes.

Katherine was rather wild. She insisted upon trying her skill in the rifle range, and had such a pretty skill that she smashed several of the bottles put up as targets, and called forth admiring comments from a crowd of men in flat caps with scarves round their necks, and from frowsy young women in velveteen dresses and big hats with feathers.

"Gord's troof! She do knock 'em abaht!" said one young woman, staring into her face.

" She's giving 'em 'Oundsditch ! " said a youth with a big greasy curl in the middle of his forehead and a bowler hat thrust to the back of his head.

The crowd showed a rather embarrassing interest in the pretty lady and the handsome young man who had come to Barnet Fair in a silk hat and a well-cut morning suit and doeskin gloves.

Oliver touched Katherine's arm.

" Let's move on. It's getting late. We ought to get back."

" I insist on seeing the Fat Woman ! " said Katherine. " I decline to go until I have gazed upon her."

So they paid their pennies and went through the curtain of a booth. Outside a red-faced man was shouting as though he were deliberately trying to break a blood-vessel: " Walk up, walk up, and see the Fattest Woman on earth. The greatest sight in the world. The hadmiration of King George and all the Roile Family ! "

Inside was a crowd of giggling girls and foul-mouthed young men. Some dirty straw was on the ground, trampled with mud, and exhaling a fetid stench. From behind a curtain came—not the Fat Lady, but a filthy negro, half naked, and with an apron of feathers. He went through a pantomime of offering up a human sacrifice, growling and roaring like a wild beast, and rolling his eyes horribly. Then he danced himself into a kind of maniacal ecstasy. It seemed to be the last degradation of humanity. This negro, for a few coppers, had abandoned all dignity of manhood and lowered himself below the level of a brute. Oliver felt Katherine's hand grasping his arm tightly. He felt a shudder run through his lady.

" Let us go ! " he said. " This is too low."

" No, no ; wait for the Fat Lady."

Three or four men pressed closely round Katherine. They were looking at her with curious, shifty eyes. Oliver glared round upon them.

" Stand back a bit ! " he said. " There's no need to push ! "

" All right, guv'nor ! " said one of the men. He winked at his companions, and presently all of them left the tent.

Then the Fat Lady appeared from behind the curtain, and instantly there was a lot of giggling among the young women, and the boys whispered and chuckled and gurgled with horrible mirth.

The Fat Lady was enormous. She wore evening dress with a short skirt, and was an amazing and awful figure. Yet she had a pleasant, amiable face, and she looked round upon the people in the tent with serious eyes, in which there was a melancholy smile.

"Poor creature!" said Katherine, in a low voice.

The woman heard, and came up to her, holding out her hand.

"Thank you for that!" she said. "Most people laugh, and do not pity me. Will you shake hands with me? I will not hurt you, pretty one."

She held out her hand. But Katherine shrank back.

"I—I would rather not," she said. "Forgive me."

The Fat Woman sighed, and then a rough man took her hand and burst out laughing, as if it were a great joke.

Katherine slipped out of the tent, and Oliver followed her.

"How awful!" she said. "Poor wretch!"

She had gone rather white, and did not object now when Oliver suggested the homeward journey.

But suddenly she put her hand to her throat and said, "Good Heavens!"

"What's the matter?"

"My diamond brooch! It has gone."

Not only her diamond brooch had gone, but when she put her hand into her muff, which was suspended from her neck by a little gold chain, she found that her purse had gone also.

Evidently the four men who had pressed against her in the tent had done a successful night's work.

Katherine was distressed.

"Rudolf gave me that brooch. It cost a lot of money, and I shall have to tell him."

"Good God!" said Oliver. "Let us go to the police."

The police were very polite but satirical.

"Very sorry, ma'am," said the Inspector, "but Barnet Fair isn't the place to wear diamond brooches. There are very nimble gentlemen round the booths."

They went round the fair with him, looking this way and that for the thieves. But obviously they had departed with the plunder.

Then Oliver remembered that he had spent all his money except a few coppers.

"How on earth shall we get back? We have not enough between us to buy our railway tickets."

They stared at each other in real dismay.

Then Katherine laughed.

"We must make the best of a bad bargain. Get a cab, Roly."

It was a long drive back, and a cold one. Katherine kept rather close to Oliver, with her hand tucked through his arm again.

"All the same, it was fun," she said.

"I am sorry I took you," said Oliver, who was still depressed and anxious about the loss of the brooch and purse.

He was wondering what Rudolf Goldstein would say when he heard of the adventure.

"The place was too low for a lady of your position. I was indiscreet!"

"I love being indiscreet!" said Katherine. "Besides, I am not a child."

She indulged in a little philosophy.

"It is good to see the seamy side of life now and then. It is good to see even the coarse side and the vile things."

"Why?" said Oliver.

"It makes one think. It makes one realise the tremendous contrasts. Look at me, with everything that life can give. I live in luxury and idleness. For the sake of a little excitement I buy a new frock, which I shall wear just once or twice. Is there anything which money can buy that I could not have?"

"A few things," said Oliver. "A dreadnought, for example."

"Nothing that I want. Rudolf says I am extravagant, yet it pleases him. I have nothing to do but spend money and search about for new luxuries and new toys. Yet those people of Barnet Fair could live for a year on what I spend in a day. That is awful to think of, isn't

it? It ought to make me feel pretty wicked; don't you think so?"

"No!" said Oliver. "Those people are happy enough. They're all right."

"Did you see the pinched faces and the sunken eyes of those men and women? They looked half-starved. I think they do not have enough to eat. No wonder they are brutal, and take their pleasures coarsely. No wonder they are thieves. If I lived that life I should be a thief and an anarchist, and everything that is violent and desperate."

"You would make a charming little anarchist," said Oliver.

"It is so easy to be good and clean and nice when one is rich. I am not angry even with those men who took my brooch. I dare say it will be of more good to them than it was to me. In a day or two Rudolf will buy me another one."

She sighed, and said, "How I pity all the children of poverty! How I despise myself for being rich!"

"I am one of the children of poverty," said Oliver.

He hesitated, and then said, "Katherine, do you know that I am very poor? Do you know that I can see the day when I shall not have enough to eat?"

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out eight pennies, and jingled them in his open hand.

"That is all the money I have in the world, and I am up to the ears in debt."

Lady Goldstein was startled.

"Are you joking?"

"I was never more serious. I am 'broke' to the world."

He laughed, but it had not a mirthful sound.

"I am beginning to be hunted. The tradesmen are after me. I have to dodge them in the street. Presently I shall not be able to dodge them any more."

"My poor boy!" said Katherine Goldstein—as if she were a very elderly person—"I did not know it was like that."

She stared at him with wondering eyes.

"What are you going to do?"

"The Lord knows."

He hesitated again.

"Perhaps if somebody would lend me fifty pounds or so, I might carry over the bad time, and get a run of luck by writing. That is my only chance."

"Do you know anybody who would lend it to you?"

"Not a soul. Most of my friends are almost as impecunious as I am."

Katherine was silent. She stared out of the window of the four-wheeled cab, and Oliver watched how, at every lamp-post they passed, the light put a glamour upon her face, and then left it vague and pale in the darkness.

She was very serious now. He wondered whether the loss of the brooch was still worrying her or whether she was thinking over his confession of poverty. He had a kind of horrible hope that his appeal for help would be heard by this girl, who had only to ask for money to get her purse filled. But as the cab jogged on he forgot his want of money, and thought only of the joy of driving like this in the darkness with a woman whose face, as he looked sideways upon it, had a haunting and mystical beauty in the passing gleams of light from the gas-lamps. He wished that this night ride might never end, and that always he might go travelling along an interminable road, in the gloom, with Katherine by his side, speaking in her low voice, speaking wistful things, revealing the thoughts that lay hidden in her heart, taking him into her confidence because they were alone together, and the solemnity of night was about them, and the busy traffic of the world was close to them, yet not troublesome. Her hand was upon his coat-sleeve; he could feel the rhythm of her quiet breathing; the fragrance of her hair was like the perfume of flowers.

There was no other woman within the circle of his life who stirred in him an emotion which made him a little afraid, distrustful of his own character, and conscious of his own feelings. He would like to be more her equal in simplicity and sincerity, more faithful to the ideal which he had adopted in her presence. Outwardly he was a handsome fellow (he knew that), but looking into his heart he saw a good deal that was rotten and false and weak. If only he had a girl like this to take him by the hand and go with him along the road of life! He would

be a nobler man. He would walk straight with her. He thought of that stiff young German husband of hers, a good fellow perhaps, but utterly unsuited to a girl of her mercurial temperament, of her bright imagination and restlesss, active brain. Such a man would never understand her. This marriage was one of two unmated souls. What cruelty there was in life! What blind and senseless blunderings of fate! A flood of pity possessed him for this wife of Rudolf Goldstein, who found no happiness in her wealth.

"Oliver, would you allow me to lend you a little money?"

Katherine Goldstein's face was in shadow now, and her voice was timid.

"No, no. I could not dream of that!"

He spoke passionately, as though her words had hurt him.

"It would humiliate me to the dust."

"I do not see why. I know what the desperate need of money means. In the old days there were times when the loan of a few pounds from a friend would have been a tremendous boon. Because I am a woman that is no reason——"

"Yes that *is* a reason. Such a thing is impossible!"

He repeated the word.

"Impossible, Katherine."

"Fifty pounds would not mean much to me. I have my own cheque-book."

He raised his hand and said, "Don't!" almost as though she had threatened to strike him.

Yet those words "Fifty pounds" made his heart beat and set his pulses jumping. With fifty pounds he could rise above that quagmire of debt into which he had sunk. It would enable him to breathe again. He would make a fresh start, and settle down to work with a new hopefulness. He would soon pay her back. He would pay her back a hundredfold, and devote his life and his writings to her.

Katherine Goldstein argued the matter out in her persistent, logical way, and with that touch of humour which always played about her words even when she was most serious.

"I have my own account. It would be a private bond between you and me. As all you men are proud, I would not tell even Rudolf, so you would not have to play billiards with him and let him beat you every time. I am not a woman to brandish a carving-knife and say, 'My money, or a pound of your prime flesh!' You need not pocket any pride, Oliver. I should be the favoured one, for I should have the pleasure of knowing that I am saving a genius from imminent ruin. At least, I hope you will turn out a genius, and do credit to my foresight and shrewd instincts. Fancy, ten years hence, when you are rich and famous, I shall say to myself—only to myself, 'I helped that young man when he was in a tight corner.' Isn't that the best thing a woman can do—to get a man out of a tight corner?"

Oliver took her hand, and bent his head low and kissed it.

"Katherine," he said, "you are too good to me. I am unworthy of your beautiful friendship. I am a wretch—a worm."

She took her hand away and put it into her muff.

"Hush! No sentiment, Oliver. No foolishness."

Oliver could see that she was blushing. Even through the gloom inside the cab he could see that.

She began to scold him. Not for kissing her hand, but for being a foolish boy, and getting into debt, and being slack with his work, and not taking himself seriously. As an old woman who had been through Fleet Street and seen the ruin of many young men who preferred the gas-light of the club to the midnight oil of their rooms, she warned him that he would have to pull himself together.

"That is my advice to you, young man. Pull yourself together, and let the water run down your back."

Oliver laughed at that. It was the strangest thing to hear Katherine playing the wise old woman to him, this girl, who was not much older than himself in years, and much younger in mind and heart.

Towards the end of the journey his voice dropped again, and he told her that she was the good fairy of his life. But she put her muff to his mouth and said:

"Don't talk nonsense, Oliver. If there is one thing I hate, it is nonsense!"

"But I am talking truth. My words come straight from my heart. I would pour out all my heart to you, if I dared—if I had the pluck."

"Hush! Here we are in Pont Street," said Katherine, as though she was rather relieved that the time was too short for further outpourings from the heart of Oliver Lumley.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### DELIBERATE INSULTS

Upon the morning following Barnet Fair Oliver received a note from Lady Goldstein. But before reading it he handled a piece of pink paper which fluttered out of the envelope. It was an open cheque for fifty pounds, signed in a fine, pointed handwriting, "Katherine Goldstein." He flushed crimson to the temples, and, for a few minutes, sat at his desk with his face in his hands, staring at that document as though it had put a spell upon him. Then he read the note. It contained only a few words.

*Dear Oliver.*

*I send you the cheque. Do not acknowledge it. If you send me anything like an IOU I shall quarrel with you. We are friends, are we not? I have confessed the loss of the brooch to Rudolf. He was quite vexed, but more angry when he heard of our adventure in the fair. He thought that it was not respectable. Foolish, dull old word! We had the greatest fun.*

*Yours very sincerely,*
*Katherine Goldstein.*

Oliver paid some of his debts out of the fifty pounds from Lady Goldstein and the five pounds from Livvy and Doris, and he marvelled why women were so good to him —marvelled, and was glad. But it was astonishing what a little way this fifty-five pounds went in paying a clamorous landlady, and impqrtunate tradespeople, and club-friends whom he had "touched," as they would say, for odd half-sovereigns and odd half-crowns. It was impossible to satisfy all their demands. Indeed, it was rather disgusting to Oliver to find that they spread among themselves the news of his new wealth. Because he paid

one man, another came along with gentle reminders. Even at the Club some of his friends said :

" I say old man. I hear you have got over your lean days. That half-sov. Quite convenient ? "

Of course it was damnably inconvenient, and Oliver had to protest that they showed unseemly haste in calling up their loans, and a memory more accurate than was allowed by true comradeship. Into the open jaws of the most ravening wolves he flung something to go on with, from the others he escaped with tact. But he was still in a perilous situation, and the money received from good women only postponed the evil day when he would have to settle with bad men.

Another thing troubled him and excited him more than his financial embarrassments, for his spirit easily—too easily—shook itself free from those responsibilities. In spite of working more regularly and industriously, he still had his afternoons and some of his evenings free, in which to enjoy the charming society of Lady Goldstein. Two afternoons, at least, in each week, found him saying " Good day " to Smithers, before clasping hands with the lady whose manners seemed somewhat too frivolous to the late butler of the Bishop of Barchester.

That lady rebuked Oliver more than once for wasting his time in drawing-rooms (it was, after all, only one drawing-room), but did not shut her door against him. On the contrary, with the benevolent idea of inspiring him, she talked of " plots," during hours when he would have been more profitably employed in writing them. Nor did she refuse his pleadings for pleasant excursions now and then to such places as Richmond Park, Kew Gardens, the Zoo, the Jewish Quarter of the East End, and to Stratford-on-Avon (where Sir Herbert Tree was on a flying visit), which he put forward as the best method of recuperating a brain overfagged with midnight labour.

" If the bowstring is always taut it snaps," said Oliver. " Surely you don't want to see my brain go snap ? A fellow *must* have a *little* recreation ! "

Lady Goldstein agreed, and said that as she had to air her new spring frocks they might as well go together.

One thing was awkward. On all these jaunts Katherine

insisted on paying expenses for Oliver and herself; and at first that was extremely galling to a young man of pride and sensibility. But as she explained to him in her candid way, what was the good of lending him a little money to tide him over evil days if he paid for her railway fares, luncheons, and other expenses out of that loan? This argument was unanswerable, so that Oliver had to consent to her plan or be deprived of her company. After this first humiliation, the arrangement came quite naturally to him.

They had many pleasant jaunts together in this way, and many amusing and delightful adventures, during which they learnt to know each other more intimately. There were one or two mishaps, as, for instance, when they lost the last train home from Windsor, where they had sat talking over the fire at the White Hart after rambling over the old castle, and picnicking in the Forest. They took a taxi-cab home at tremendous expense (Lady Goldstein paid again), and that night Katherine, with a laugh that did not ring quite true, said that Oliver had better not come in. She could handle Rudolf better alone. Oliver agreed with extreme readiness, for even now he did not care to face a young man who had an unpleasant habit of looking straight down his nose, pulling his fair moustache, and saying nothing.

It was at this time that Oliver began to notice a change in the behaviour to him of Katherine's literary and artistic friends. A coldness crept over them. They seemed to resent his appearance in Lady Goldstein's drawing-room. If they had been laughing and joking with Katherine in their old way, the fire of their conversation became fitful, smouldered, and went out, as soon as Oliver joined the circle.

It was some time before he realised this. He first began to wonder what frost was in the air when Francis Luttrell "cut" him deliberately in the Strand one day, and when on the same afternoon Halliday Wing ignored the hand which Oliver held out to him in Lady Goldstein's house. Upon an evening in the same week—it was the night before his adventure at Windsor—when Gilbert Verney, Edmund Grattan, Bertram Ordish,

and the little musician Frolenko were discussing the latest novels with their hostess, they left Oliver out of their conversation, in a pointed way, and made him feel extremely uncomfortable. He became angry, and was bold enough to challenge the opinion of Edmund Grattan upon the literary art of H. G. Wells.

The whimsical Irishman, who had been a war correspondent in all parts of the world, stared at him as though he were some buzzing insect that had become annoying.

"I am not troubling to answer your opinion, Mr. Lumley," he said quietly. "When you have been about the world a little more your ideas may be worth hearing."

It was a deliberate insult, and emphasised by a chuckle from Bertram Ordish, who had had his eyes shut and appeared to be sleeping, and by an amused smile which curved the thin lips of Halliday Wing.

"I have a perfect right to express my opinion," said Oliver rather hotly. "I do not attempt to monopolise the conversation like some people here."

"Meaning me?" said Grattan.

He leant forward in his chair, and looked as though he might make a pounce on Oliver. There was a glitter of light in his grey eyes.

"Hush!" said Lady Goldstein. "Little children love one another. I will have no quarrelling here."

She called to Oliver to look at some engravings she had bought in an old print shop. She spread them out on the rosewood piano, away from the men grouped round the fire. Oliver turned them over, and Katherine, leaning over the piano with her chin in the palm of her hand and her little pointed elbows on the polished wood, had turned her back upon her guests.

"What is the matter?" asked Oliver in a low voice. "What have I done to offend these fellows? They treat me as if I were a pariah dog."

"They were only a little snappy. It is the East wind. Don't pay any attention to it."

She seemed more agitated than her words suggested. For the rest of the evening she was rather silent, but addressed most of her remarks to Oliver, as though to rebuke these friends who had been rude to him. Once when she caught Bertram Ordish's gaze fixed upon her

with a puzzled and rather anxious look, she blushed deeply, and then to hide her confusion turned to Frolenko and asked him to play something merry and bright.

"We all seem horribly dull to-night."

Frolenko played some wild Bohemian dances. The room throbbed and quivered with fantastic melodies. But presently he fell into another mood, and played a wailing lament full of tears. His fiddle seemed to sob like a woman with a bleeding heart.

In the middle of it Katherine sprang up with a sharp cry of, "Don't! . . . That's a horrible thing you are playing."

Frolenka grimaced in his monkey-like way.

"I thought you wouldn't like it. It is the cry of women to whom love has been denied. I made it up myself after spending a morning in the Divorce Court."

"You morbid little wretch!" said Katherine.

"Music strips the soul naked," said Bertram Ordish.

That evening Ordish and Oliver left the house together. The older man hailed a cab. "I must get back to Battersea," he said. They were the first words he had spoken to Oliver for the last couple of hours. But now he put his hand on Oliver's shoulder in a friendly way and said, "Lumley, I am old enough to be your father. Will you let me give you a word of advise?"

"I will listen," said Oliver, rather haughtily.

"It is not good for a young man to go about too much with a married woman. It leads to trouble. The husbands don't like it. Funny, but true."

"What do you mean?"

Oliver was very angry. He jerked out the sentence like a revolver shot.

Ordish still had his hand on Oliver's shoulder. He pressed it almost affectionately.

"Katherine is a dear, sweet girl, but rather self-willed and indiscreet. We must take care of her, Lumley. See?"

The cab rattled up, and he jumped in with a "Good night!"

Oliver stood on the pavement. He stood there for a minute or two, staring at the ground.

"Confounded impudence!" he said.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE END OF AN IDYLL

Upon the morning after the expedition to Windsor when they had driven back to town very late, Oliver lay in bed thinking over the incidents of that day with Katherine.

It had been the most beautiful day in his life. They had played games of make-believe together in the Castle and in the Park. He had pretended that Katherine was a queen and that he was her faithful knight. In the Castle grounds the spring flowers were blowing. There were hyacinths and jonquils in the long grass of the moat. He said that they were flower-fairies, who had come to dance upon the greensward in her honour. A soldiers' band was playing outside the gateway, and he said that this was the guard of honour for Queen Katherine. Together they wandered under the grey old walls and passed beneath Norman archways and strolled about the quadrangles and went into the dim aisles of Henry VII's chapel, and they told each other scraps of history, and conjured up old ghosts, and fell into a romantic mood.

Then after midday they went into the town and bought some sandwiches, and passing down the Long Walk struck straight into the heart of the Great Park, among the grand old oaks, where the quiet deer flung back their antlers and stared at them with mild, curious eyes. There was the sound of a distant motor-horn, and Katherine said it was old Herne the hunter winding his horn in far-off glades.

All the trees and twigs of Windsor Forest were jewelled with the first buds of spring, and there was wine in the air, and sunlight touched each tree-trunk and gnarled old branch with a shaft of gold, and glinted upon the dead bracken of last year's autumn and upon the green fronds of the new shoots.

They were quite alone in the Forest. Not a soul passed them. Oliver spread out his overcoat under one of the biggest oaks, and Katherine sat upon it with her back to the tree, and they had a merry luncheon with the sandwiches. Afterwards Oliver wandered off to find a brook for drinking water. He failed in the quest, and when he came back Katherine was fast asleep, with her head leaning sideways against the trunk.

She had taken off her hat and her fair hair was touched with the golden light of the afternoon sun. She was smiling in her sleep, and Oliver sitting down in front of her had a new revelation of her beauty. She seemed to him like some wood-nymph who had strayed out of fairyland into this old forest.

It was getting chilly now, and very softly he took off his Norfolk jacket and put it over her, hardly breathing lest he should wake her. For an hour he sat watching her, and strange thoughts came into his head, and curious little dreams, in which he seemed to be wandering hand-in-hand with Katherine through endless woods. Presently as he sat there in his shirt-sleeves he sneezed irresistibly and loudly. Katherine awakened with a start, and when she saw him there without his coat, and realised that she had been sleeping and that he had covered her with his own jacket, she started up, blushing, and rather angry with herself and him.

"You will catch your death of cold! What an utterly absurd thing to do! How long have I been dozing?"

She could hardly believe that she had been asleep an hour, and she protested that he had not played the game. He ought to have wakened her. So they quarrelled, but made it up again, and walking back to Windsor had dinner at the White Hart, and then, as I have said, talked so long that they missed the last train back to town.

Oliver did not regret that until the next morning when, as he lay in bed, the maidservant brought a letter on the tray with his early cup of tea. It was addressed in a handwriting strange to Oliver, a bold, pointed script, with a tremendous flourish to the tail of "Lumley."

"Good Lord, another bill!"

But when he broke the seal and read the letter, he went quite pale. It contained but a line or two.

*Sir Rudolf Goldstein requests Mr. Oliver Lumley to discontinue his visits to* 31, *Pont Street. The servants have been given orders in accordance with this request.*

That was all, and it was enough to send the world crashing under the feet of the young man to whom that house in Pont Street had been a little heaven.

"The servants had been given orders." That phrase stung him. It was deliberately insulting. It was an outrage.

Oliver rose and dressed himself. He was trembling with nervousness, and as the meaning of the letter burnt itself into his brain he was tortured. The house was closed to him. Never again would he enjoy those hours which for nearly a year now had been the best and happiest in his life. A jealous husband was playing the tyrant. Goldstein's German traditions had mastered him, and he intended to prevent his wife from enjoying a friendship with a man who understood her temperament and had satisfied some of her desires—for a little liberty, for harmless adventures, for innocent mirth.

As Oliver thought over the matter a furious anger stirred in him. He could see it all now. Those friends of Katherine, the priggish Luttrell, Halliday Wing the poseur, gruff old Bertram Ordish, the wild Irishman Grattan, the whole crowd who had frequented Katherine's drawing-room, had poisoned Goldstein's mind against him. They were jealous of him. . . . But he would not be shut out like this. He would not surrender his friendship because of a jealous German and a pack of scandal-mongering rivals. He would go to her through fire and blood.

All his youthfulness throbbed at his pulse, and put fire into his heart.

"Good God! My love for Katherine is the vital spark in me. Without it I go out!"

He had never used that word "love" before in relation to Katherine Goldstein. But now it took possession of him. It prompted him to do wild things. It filled

him with self-pity, with a strange passion, with a hatred of Katherine's German husband, who was spoiling her life and breaking her spirit.

He paced up and down the room breathing out her name, like the young Dante to his Beatrice. "Katherine, my pretty Katherine."

But that did not alter the grim facts. The house in Pont Street was closed against him. The servants had been given orders, and he dared not go there. He wrote a letter to Katherine, enclosing her husband's note.

*Do you approve of his cruelty? I cannot believe that. I have faith in your friendship. I am conscious of having done nothing, of having said nothing that justifies your husband in dealing me this blow. I acknowledge only that to you I owe the best gift a man may have, the charity and gracious sympathy of a good woman. Please send me one line explaining this mystery, which bewilders me.*

More than one line came by the next morning's post.

*My Poor Boy,*

*We are both in trouble. Rudolf is unreasonable, absurd, and terribly German. I did not know till now how very German he may be at times. It seems that we have been together too often and too long. He objects to our little adventures and excursions. Nothing that I say will make him alter his opinion that what I called right is wrong. Of course we have quarrelled, and I hate quarrelling. I am very angry with him for forbidding any more visits from you. I cannot pardon that, and I will not obey his command—he used the word command—to break off my friendship with you. I do not find it in my nature to obey, at any time, and I permit myself the liberty of choosing my own friends and keeping them. It is Rudolf's house, and therefore I cannot invite you here again, until he has asked my forgiveness, but there are many places in London where two friends may chat. I propose going to the National Gallery to-morrow afternoon to study the pictures in the Venetian room.*

*Always yours sincerely,*
*Katherine Goldstein.*

To the Venetian room of the National Gallery went Oliver Lumley next day, and he found Katherine Goldstein, in a very charming costume, gazing at a picture of the Madonna, by Bellini.

"Katherine!" he said, with tenderness in his voice.

She gave the tips of her fingers to him.

"Oh, how do you do? . . . That is a wonderful picture, isn't it? The colouring is very fine."

He was taken aback by her politeness. He had expected a different greeting, something more in harmony with his own mood, which was vibrant and romantic.

"Don't bother about the pictures. Let us talk."

"But I have come here for the pictures!"

She wandered round the gallery, seeming to take a deep interest in the works of those Venetian masters, to whom she gave tributes of praise.

Oliver followed her, chilled and gloomy. In this great crisis of their lives it was strange for Katherine to be playing the art critic.

"Katherine, what are we to do?"

"Do?" She did not notice his burning eyes.

"I must see you—often. I cannot let our—our friendship be smashed up."

A smile flickered about her lips.

"There is no reason for anything so dreadful. You are one of my friends. As long as you behave nicely, our friendship stands where it stood."

She was cool and self-possessed. She did not blush nor show any signs of emotion. Oliver was surprised and disappointed. Again he felt chilled.

"If I cannot come to your house I am an exile and an outcast. I cannot understand your husband's action, and he does not deign to give me an explanation. What is the meaning of it?"

"My dear child, husbands are still in the position of being able to do unreasonable things without explanation. When you are a husband, you will claim the same privilege."

Oliver's answer came from the depths of gloom.

"I shall never be a husband."

Katherine was amused with that, and reminded him of a certain Benedick.

They had tea together in a shop near Trafalgar Square, and Katherine talked of pictures, of Oliver's latest magazine story (she did not like it), and of the people at the table near them.

Afterwards she said, "Please get me a cab," and then, before driving away, she looked up at his woebegone face and seemed to be sorry to see him so miserable.

"Silly boy! Don't take things too seriously. Where's your sense of humour?"

"The fun has gone out of things."

"Oh no! It is all very amusing. Rudolf has made me angry, but he makes me laugh too. He cannot help his German ancestors!"

When she had driven away, leaving Oliver on a refuge in the middle of Trafalgar Square, he said rude and unkind things about Rudolf Goldstein's ancestors.

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP

DURING the next four weeks Oliver had the felicity of seeing Lady Goldstein eight times. He grumbled miserably, considering this to be short commons for a man who was starving for love. (He used that word "love" now habitually in his self communings, and it gave him a sense of romantic tragedy). Nevertheless he made the most of those meetings, which had the piquancy of stolen fruit.

Generally it was Katherine who arranged them. From her friends she found it easy to get theatre tickets. She had but to ring up Francis Luttrell, Edmund Grattan, or Gilbert Verney, and mention her wish to see any piece at any theatre. As journalists and dramatic critics, they seemed to command the front rows of the stalls.

So it was that in four weeks Oliver saw six bad plays. He enjoyed them vastly, because it was delightful to sit in his evening clothes (which were getting a little shabby now) next to the most elegant and most beautiful woman in the theatre, who attracted all eyes when she came in to take her seat, and who invested Oliver in some of her own glamour.

It was delightful, but not entirely satisfactory. While the plays were in progress he could make little jokes to her, and keep her amused, but he could not say those private things which he yearned to say. Nor between the acts, when the lights went up, could he pour out his heart to her. He needed more elbow-room and less publicity. After the theatre he had to see her straight into her cab, or into her own car, because she would not listen to his invitations to supper.

"Lazy Oliver! You must go back to work. I am sure you are not getting on with your writing. Remember your promise."

Never once did she remind him of the fifty pounds she had lent him, and there were times when he quite forgot that loan. Love is not to be alloyed with dross.

Upon each night at the theatre some of Lady Goldstein's friends were present, and greeted her from boxes, stalls, or balcony. Francis Luttrell was there one night, and when he saw Katherine he came towards her and his tired grey eyes suddenly lighted up. But then he caught sight of Oliver, and instead of coming to speak to Katherine he merely bowed and passed through a swing door. By a slight flush that crept into Katherine's cheeks Oliver thought that she had noticed this sudden change in Luttrell's manner.

Once she put her hand on his sleeve and said :

" Do you see that fat lady staring at us from the box over there—the upper box ? "

" Yes. That old harridan with the osprey feather and the diamond dog-collar. The old boy with her is staring now. Who are they ? "

" The Ecksteins of Hampstead. To-morrow the Berensteins and the Rosenbaums will know that I was here to-night. It is wonderful how they spread the news."

She seemed rather disconcerted by the presence of her husband's relations, and while the play was going on she glanced over at their box several times. Oliver had a mind to suggest to her that they should not meet in such public places ; but, for some reason, he had not the courage to hint at this. Katherine's candid eyes rebuked any idea of secrecy.

So he developed his knowledge as a dramatic critic until one evening he received an invitation from Halliday Wing. It was curiously worded :

*My dear Lumley,*

*I desire to see you on an important and private matter. I shall be glad if you will call at my studio here at nine o'clock to-morrow evening, without fail, when you will hear something to your advantage. It does not, of course, refer to that small loan for which I hold your IOU.*

Oliver was startled by that letter. He wondered whether it announced a piece of good luck or concealed a threat.

He took an omnibus to Chelsea on the following evening, and at a few minutes after nine walked down a long, dark passage in a block of studios until he came to a door over which in black letters on a small pane of glass, illuminated from within, was the name Halliday Wing.

He tapped at the door, and a voice called out "Come!"

Oliver walked into a large studio, littered with canvases and an artist's paraphernalia. Wing himself was standing by his easel, playing about with a pencil on a square of cardboard. He glanced over to Oliver and said, "I am glad you have come. You will find a chair and some cigarettes."

Then Oliver saw that Francis Luttrell was in the room, and Edmund Grattan, and Charles Hardy, and Bertram Ordish, and Frolenko the fiddler. They were all smoking, and Grattan had a glass of whisky at his elbow. Hardy was the only one who spoke to Oliver as he entered. He said. "Halloa, Lumley! I haven't seen you for some time."

"No."

Oliver looked round at the men, whom he had seen together fairly often in Lady Goldstein's drawing-room. They smoked silently, and the general atmosphere did not seem too friendly.

"Is this a committee meeting?"

Oliver asked the question with a nervous laugh. He looked over at Hardy, but his friend avoided his gaze.

"Something of the sort," said Halliday Wing quietly. He seemed to be making studies of Frank Luttrell's profile.

Oliver took a chair at a deal table, and helped himself to a cigarette.

"Anybody got a light?"

It was Ordish who passed over a box of matches.

Hardy began to whistle a tune with an air of being perfectly at his ease.

Frolenko said, "You have not an ear for music, my friend."

Then there was silence, until Bertram Ordish stretched out his large legs, put his hands into the pockets of his Norfolk jacket, and said, "Look here, Wing; you have brought young Lumley over to this dog-kennel of yours. You had better get straight to the point, hadn't you?"

Halliday Wing stroked his Vandyke beard and stared at Oliver thoughtfully.

"Yes. It is no use beating about the bush."

Oliver shifted in his seat. What was this extraordinary business? Why was he brought into the presence of all these men, like a prisoner at the bar? He appealed to Hardy, whom he knew best.

"Look here! What the devil is the meaning of all this?"

But Hardy was examining the bowl of his pipe, and did not answer.

Halliday Wing was still stroking his beard. Then he lit a cigarette, and, turning to Ordish, said: "You are the oldest among us. You can have the word."

Bertram Ordish, a big man, loose-limbed, with a strong, clean-cut face and dreamy eyes, sat up in his chair. He looked at Oliver with a pleasant, frank smile.

"Look here, Lumley. All this seems very mysterious to you, and I don't altogether approve of this assembly. However, that was Wing's idea, and here we are."

"What for?" cried Oliver.

"We are speaking within four walls, and we are all friends here. Nothing will go outside. Therefore you must forgive a little plain-speaking. We want to talk about Lady Goldstein—our Katherine."

Oliver flushed hotly.

"I object to discussing Lady Goldstein in any way whatever."

"My dear lad," said Ordish, "be reasonable. It is a question of"—he paused for a phrase—"of safeguarding a lady's reputation and happiness."

"Katherine's reputation! This is damned insolence!"

Oliver sprang up and thrust his chair back.

Edmund Grattan went to the door and locked it.

"We do not want any intruders," he said.

Ordish went on speaking. His grey eyes seemed to hold Oliver's gaze.

"Keep cool, Lumley. We are making no accusation against you. We have too much faith in Kitty for any accusation to be necessary."

"I see I am trapped here," said Oliver. "Come to the point."

"I will. All of us here—Grattan, Verney, Hardy, Wing, Frank Luttrell over there, Frolenko and myself, have known Katherine for a good long time, some of us for several years, and I think I may say that we all"—his eyes strayed over to Luttrell, the pale fellow who had been dressed as Lancelot at the artists' ball—"that we all have a very real devotion to her. So you see that when we see her doing indiscreet things, rather dangerous things—dangerous, I mean, to her happiness and reputation—we are anxious and troubled."

"What on earth does all this rhodomontade mean?" said Oliver. "Am I responsible for Lady Goldstein's indiscretions?"

"In a way," said Ordish. "You spend too much time in her company. You have taken too much advantage of her girlishness, of her good-nature, and of her desire for a little excitement. You have allowed yourself to forget that she is a married woman, and that her husband has certain claims which must be respected by any friend who receives his hospitality."

"Her husband! That German, with as much sensibility as a block of wood!"

Oliver gave a scornful laugh.

"You convict yourself," said Ordish gravely. "You have eaten his salt, and you have no right to insult him. I know Rudolf Goldstein to be a simple, good fellow, perfectly devoted to his wife. Isn't that so, boys?"

He looked round to his friends.

"Rudolf is one of the best," said Grattan.

"Very well," said Oliver. "What then?"

It was Frolenko who took up the speech.

"I will tell you what then," he said excitedly, his little black eyes glaring at Oliver. "It is your damned cheek to go about always with that lady which we speak of. People talk. They say Lady Goldstein is

too much with one young man—one boy who whisper in her ear, who hold secrets with her, who burn her with his eyes. People shake their heads and say, 'Poor Rudolf!' Lady Goldstein's husband go about hang-dog. His wife laugh at him, a little mocking. Yet when I play to her she no longer laugh. I bring the tears out of her heart. We, her old friends, suffer because she lose her gaiety, her beautiful spirit. That is what then, my friend. We say this goes on no more. We will stop that young man who play the dash fool with our dear lady. If he go on we take him by the throat. We use a horsewhip to him. I myself will whip him with my bow-string. Now you know what then!"

Ordish got up, and taking Frolenko by the shoulders thrust him down into his seat.

"Monkey-man, you get too excited. We have no quarrel with Lumley. He is a good fellow. He will listen to reason."

"I am listening to lunatics," said Oliver.

"I should not speak like that," said Grattan. "I advise you to keep a civil tongue. We ask only one thing of you. If you have any work, stick to it and do not come hanging round a lady who has a good fellow for a husband, and friends who will protect her good name."

Frank Luttrell spoke for the first time.

"I think we are not justified in adopting a hostile attitude to Mr. Lumley. Katherine has given him her friendship. He is therefore one of our friends. The only thing we may ask him is to be a little more careful, and to guard Katherine wisely from indiscretions into which she is apt to fall on account of her high-spirited nature and sense of humour."

"I agree," said Ordish. "We ask this as a favour of Lumley."

He went over and put his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

"My dear lad, you will help us, I know. It would be very painful if there were strained relations between Lady Goldstein and her husband. Things have gone a little too far already. Do you understand?"

Oliver shook off Bertram Ordish's big hand.

"I understand nothing," he said, "except that you

are all damnably jealous of my friendship with Lady Goldstein. The character of that friendship does not depend upon the good pleasure of Fleet Street journalists and Chelsea artists."

He took up his hat and stick, and went towards the door.

"Do you keep me prisoner?" he asked, remembering that the door was locked. In his heart he felt that he was playing a difficult part with dignity.

Frolenko was like a cat about to make a spring. His little bullet head was poised on one side. His eyes had a reddish light in their blackness. Ordish leant over to him and put his hand on his knee.

Edmund Grattan laughed.

"It seems we might have saved our breath to cool our porridge."

To Oliver he said, "The key turns in the lock."

Then he lit his pipe, and puffed out a long cloud of smoke.

Oliver unlocked the door and went out of the studio with his head held high and his lips tightened to a hard line. As he strode down the King's Road people turned to glance round at that tall, handsome young man who looked as if he were defiant of fate.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### SHARP ARROWS

ANOTHER week passed, during which he did not see Katherine again. She answered his long letters by short notes, kind, but not glowing. He did not tell her of that scene in Halliday Wing's studio.

He was in a desperate mood. As he had said to Katherine, the fun had gone out of things.

Then one evening, as he was sitting in his rooms scratching a criss-cross pattern on his writing-block, attempting to start a new story, but starting always on long journeys with Katherine through fields of fancy, there was a tap at his door, and Mrs. Trant put her head inside his room.

"There's a lidy in the 'all, Mr. Oliver. Shall I let 'er in?"

"A lady?"

Oliver made a stride to the door and saw Katherine standing there studying a large engraving of "The Huguenot" by Millais.

She turned to him as he came out, and said, "Are you busy? Am I interfering with your work?"

"Not a bit! This is splendid of you. Mrs. Trant, will you make some coffee?"

Mrs. Trant said, "If it is your orders, Mr. Oliver"; but she stared at Lady Goldstein with a grim look, as though she were doubtful of the character of this lady in evening dress with glittering jewels in her hair.

It was nine o'clock, and Oliver's supper-things still lay on the table, and his armchair was heaped up with papers. He removed the papers, and drew the chair up close to the fire.

"How tremendously good of you to come like this!"

His voice shook with excitement, and his heart was beating like a sledge-hammer.

Katherine sat down and let her cloak slip from her shoulders. She was in a white evening gown, and her arms were bare to the elbows. She warmed her hands at his fire.

"So this is your den? I have often wanted to see you in it. I slipped away from a reception in Brooke Street."

"I have been craving to see you. It is a life-time since I last met you."

"It is a week," said Katherine.

She looked over to him with a whimsical smile.

"I ought not to be here now. I am risking the severe displeasure of my lord."

"You take the risk for my sake? I am very gratful."

"Not for your sake. Oh, dear no!" said Lady Goldstein provokingly. "I was terribly bored with my husband's second, third and fourth cousins. They have all relapsed into the German language. I could not stand it any more. I felt myself sinking into gibbering idiocy."

Mrs. Trant brought in the coffee-things. She put them on the table with a clatter, and walked out of the room, clothed in austerity. She suspected scandal, and was jealous for the good name of her lodging-house.

Katherine sipped the coffee and smoked a cigarette. Oliver watched her and could find very little to say. His eyes were burning, and there was a dryness in his throat. But Katherine chatted quietly and as though thoroughly at home, and afterwards went to his book-shelves and took down one or two volumes and reproved him for his interest in second-rate novels.

Oliver went to the door and turned the key. Perhaps the idea was suggested to him by Grattan's action in the studio. At the click Katherine looked round and said, "Why do you do that?"

"I don't want Mrs. Trant to bother us again."

She searched his face, and seemed to read something strange in its expression. The book in her hand trembled slightly.

Oliver went over to her and said, "Katherine, sit down again. I want to speak to you."

"It is getting late. I must go now."

She went over to the chair and picked up her cloak.

But Oliver took it from her hands.

"I *must* talk to you. Please sit down. Please!"

His voice was so emotional, his face so grave and pleading, that Katherine was startled. She sat in the big armchair and tried to laugh. But there was a scared look in her eyes.

"What do you want to tell me, Roly? Be quick, for it is time to go."

He sat on the edge of the table, leaning forward to her.

"Katherine, why is the world so cruel to us both?"

"Is that a riddle?"

She laughed again, but nervously.

"Yes. It is the riddle of life. I cannot find the answer to it."

He slipped off the edge of the table, and then suddenly knelt down by her chair and took her hand.

"Look here, it is no use beating about the bush. I love you. I am on fire with love for you."

She went very white, and tried to take her hand away, but he held it fast.

"Oliver—you must not——"

"I must. Katherine, listen to me. You and I were made for each other. Something stronger than ourselves has brought us together—we cannot get away from it. What are we to do? Are you going to submit to this brutal tyranny of your husband?"

"I think you are mad."

Katherine spoke the words sharply. She tore her hand away from his grasp, and tried to stand up. But Oliver held her to the chair.

"Yes, I am mad! I am mad to think that you should suffer so much unhappiness in your married life."

"This is horrible!"

Katherine spoke in a whisper. Her face was deadly white now, and, pinioned in Oliver's grasp, she threw her head to right and left, like a trapped animal seeking a way of escape.

"Katherine, I shall go to the devil if you do not let me love you. Your husband shall not keep you a prisoner from me. See, I dare to kiss your lips!"

He put his arm about her neck, and put his head down to her face. But she jerked her head on one side violently, and struck him with her hand across the face.

She was standing now, panting a little, and with a flushed face.

"I thought you were a gentleman."

"My dear girl, I love you. Forgive me for being rough."

"I believe I could trust you!" said Katherine.

"You shall trust me," said Oliver; but he was frightened now. He did not like that look on Katherine's face. It was a look of contempt.

"My husband was right after all. You are a man to take advantage of a woman's friendship."

"Good God! Katherine!"

He stood trembling before her.

"My husband. . . . You call him brutal! He has been kinder than anyone in life to me."

"Rudolf?" said Oliver. He was angered. "He has played the petty tyrant. He has crushed your spirit."

"Nonsense! He has spoilt me and pampered me."

"Why did you jeer at him then? You have always scoffed at him. You cannot deny that, Katherine."

It was an attempt to justify himself.

"Yes; I have laughed at him," said Katherine. "I have made fun of his German ways. I have been unkind to him. . . . Oh, this is my punishment. These insults. This outrage!"

She cried a little, and Oliver sat upon his window-sill, bewildered, abashed, and silent.

"Why did you lead me on, then?" he said presently, in a hard voice. "Why have we been playing the fool together?"

"I took pity on you."

"Pity! Good Lord, I did not want your pity!"

His face flushed with anger and shame.

"I pitied you because of your boyishness and poverty, and because my friends treated you slightingly. . . . They were right. Rudolf was right. You have not learnt to play the game."

Oliver was blanched now. It seemed that her words were giving him mortal wounds.

"I thought you were nice-minded. I was angry with my husband because he disliked you and warned me against you. My generous husband, whom you have dared to abuse!"

"It is a pity you did not tell me before how much you loved your dear husband!"

His sneering words brought a flame to Katherine's face now. She put on her cloak.

"Unlock that door. I will never speak to you again."

Oliver was no longer pleading. He laughed bitterly.

"So women break men's hearts and fling the pieces away! I was a fool. I ought to have known. Did you not teach me to love you? By God, you went out of your way to tempt me! Do you forget all our excursions together; all our adventures when you came along with me? I am no boy. I am a man with human passions and qualities. How could I resist your beauty?"

Then his anger went out, and he put his hands to his face and hid his tears.

A little pity stole into Katherine's eyes.

"I am partly to blame. I have been frightfully foolish. I ask you to forgive me for that. I had no idea. . . ."

She went to the door and unlocked it.

"Anyhow, we must not see each other again."

She went back and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Oliver, I am sorry."

He raised his head.

"I am a broken man. You ought to be sorry."

"We must both be sorry. We have behaved like children."

She gave a little sob, but checked it, and said, "Please show me out."

He took her to the door, and called a cab for her.

She did not hold out her hand to him, or say good-bye. Her eyelashes were wet with tears. As she drove away he had a last glimpse of her white face.

He went back to his room, stumbling like a drunken man. For hours he sat hunched up before his fire, long after it had burnt out and left cold ashes in the grate.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE FUGITIVE

"THERE is a damned conspiracy against me!"

Oliver, sitting in the midst of ruined hopes and with a bruised and bleeding pride, made this accusation against the world, and cried out in self-pity.

It seemed as if Katherine's abandonment had given the signal to all the gods or devils of fate who had a grudge against him. All the difficulties and troubles which had been thrust on one side with reckless courage now fell upon him in a heap, and he was beaten to his knees.

Stories and articles which he had sent out with the sure hope that they would reach havens of prosperity came fluttering back, dirty and dog's-eared, like birds with broken wings. All the editors in London had conspired to beggar him. The postman's double knocks, which heralded the return of these unfortunate children of his brain, were like the hammering of coffin-nails. There were times when he would have liked to muffle the knocker, so that the noise of another disappointed hope should not beat so horribly upon his brain.

The postman himself seemed in league with the devil. No longer did he bring gay little letters from Katherine Goldstein. She was silent now. She had not answered his last entreaties. But the postman was the messenger of all his enemies, and every envelope thrust through the letter-box contained a threat.

Tradesmen demanded settlement of their accounts "by return." His tailor wrote with deliberate insolence. The secretary of the club warned him that his name would be posted up unless he paid his subscription. But worse than this was the combined attack of those whom once he had believed to be his friends. Halliday Wing, Gilbert Verney, and Edmund Grattan reminded him

that he was in their debt for various small sums. "If you have any sense of honour," wrote Wing, "you will now redeem your IOU."

That was sheer revenge for the quarrel in his studio. Other demands for money growled at him from every quarter, as though hungry wolves were yapping about his heels.

Even his family joined in the hunt. His father hoped that he might soon rely upon his son for the repayment of the monthly allowance which had been advanced with so much difficulty, and had drained him perilously.

*You will realise, my dear Oliver, that I am still struggling with that arithmetical problem which has troubled me all my married life—the way to make both ends meet. The strain is getting too much for me in my declining years.*

Horace wrote twice.

*Dear old boy* (he said),

*Surely as a successful man of letters you can see your way to pay back those few pounds which I have lent you from time to time. The mater is pining for a little holiday, and Galatea wants a change of air badly. If you could send me a cheque for ten pounds I would take them away for Easter—to Bournemouth or somewhere.*

Oliver laughed with a frightful bitterness over a phrase in that letter: "As a successful man of letters." The irony of it was deadly

But the last blow which bludgeoned him to his knees was a letter from Rudolf Goldstein. It brought a whimper to his lips. He knew that he was broken utterly when he read those words.

*It has come to my knowledge that my wife has lent you the sum of fifty pounds. As, in my opinion, it is an impossible thing for a man of your age and position to be in debt to a married lady, I take the liberty of advising you to return this money immediately. I am old-fashioned enough to believe that a man who borrows*

*from any woman not intimately related to him runs a grave risk of accusations against his honour. It is right to say that Lady Goldstein does not take this view, and does not wish the money to be returned. But I write to you as man to man, and entirely in your own interests.*

This letter from a man who had closed his door against him filled Oliver with a sense of such bitter humiliation that he was covered with dust and ashes. At twenty-four years of age, he felt like an old man whose hopes have crumbled about him, and for whom there is nothing to look forward to but death. He obtained a kind of fierce consolation by wallowing in self-abasement and self-reproach. He exaggerated his follies, and piled up mountains of shame upon his own head.

But always he came back to his position. He was trapped, he could not find a way out. It would be as easy for him to find the Philosopher's Stone as the money to pay back Lady Goldstein, or those other people from whom he had borrowed small sums. There came to him, in an overpowering craving, a desire to escape—to escape from the tangle in which he was coiled, from London, in which he was a miserable failure, from himself most of all.

He became morbid, and believed that the only way of this escape was through the gates of Death. Suicide tempted him devilishly and seductively. Newspaper headlines thrust themselves before his mental vision. "Sad Death of a Well-known Writer." "Shocking Discovery in Westminster. "Remarkable Letter before Death." He composed the text of that letter, and filled it with bitter irony. He thought out keen-edged epigrams to stab the breast of a cultured world. Sonorous sentences breathing a spirit of sombre melancholy came into his brain, and he murmured them to himself with a miserable kind of satisfaction. His eyes became moist at the picture of himself lying stark and stiff upon the hearthrug, and he wept over his own dead body. He saw Mrs. Trant come into his room in the early morning. She crossed the floor, called his name twice, bent down and touched him, and gave a piercing shriek at her frightful discovery.

He would leave one line for Katherine. "Without your love I cannot live!" She would be sorry for him then. Perhaps she would weep for him. She would remember their adventures, those fireside hours, when they had talked about books and plots. That would be his revenge for her abandonment. Her friends would talk of him in whispers. They would regret having hounded him to his death.

And here and there in the world people who had read his stories would remember his name, would recall some of his tales, and would sigh at this end to a bright and promising career. Women like Virginia Garland, who had followed his work with sympathy, would mourn this loss to English literature.

Virginia Garland. He had almost forgotten that dream-woman. Her name called to him. There was the sound of spring in it. Outside the windows, even in Westminster, there was the glint of spring sunshine, and Oliver stared at two sparrows twittering and flirting on the railings opposite. It would be a pity to die in the spring, when life was throbbing everywhere. Down in the country, where Virginia Garland lived, the flowers would be spangling the grass. In her garden she would walk in beauty and fragrance. It would be good to escape from London, with all its noise and cruelty, into the peace of such a garden. Perhaps there he would find healing for his bleeding heart. Peace, anyhow, and perhaps a new birth. If Virginia Garland would give him her sympathy—such sympathy as had breathed through her letters—he might build himself up again—his pride and career.

During several days the idea grew upon him. He put aside his suicidal thoughts and yearned to get away into the country. He would slip away quietly, without farewells. Nobody would miss him. Not Katherine. Not even his family. That brought bitterness again, and pity for himself. Then one night he made his resolution. He would go down to Worcestershire with the ten-pound note which still remained out of Katherine's loan, the only wealth he could collect. Perhaps he might get that little cottage which Virginia Garland had pictured in one of her letters—the cottage below

her garden wall. He could live cheaply there, and in the country-side ideas would come. His brain would be freshened and strengthened. He would write a big novel, and rebuke his enemies with his fame. The day would come when they would have to give him their admiration.

Oliver became surprisingly cheerful for a young man who had been so near to the black abyss. He wrote several letters to creditors, explaining that he was called away and would settle their accounts at a future date. One letter was to his landlady. He told her to sell his few belongings—they were worth a few pounds—to pay for his board and lodging.

To his mother he wrote a longer letter, very tender and affectionate. He was sorry, he said, for all the anxiety he had caused her since boyhood, and for the poor way in which he had repaid her love. But one day he hoped to come with honours and riches in his hands. Not one member of his family would have cause to blame him then. He would be generous to all of them. He would help the old governor in his poverty, and lift old Horace out of the ruck, and give Galatea a good time in life. But the best of gifts would be to his mother. . . . They must not expect to hear from him for some time. He was going away into the country to write his masterpiece.

Oliver's old optimism, his rosy dreams, shone in every sentence of that letter.

To Katherine he wrote last of all.

*I am going away. I cannot bear to stay in London now that you have cast me out of your life. The remembrance of joyful hours when I could claim your friendship cuts into my heart like a sharp knife. I cannot pass the National Gallery, even, without a sense of weakness and misery. The very advertisements of the theatres, in which you and I sat so merrily, bring back memories which mock at me. So I go in search of forgetfulness, to other scenes not haunted by your spirit. I cannot lie and say I do not love you still. But my heart is like the flower which peasants call Love-lies-bleeding. Katherine, I say good-bye, and think I kiss your hand. I hope you may be as happy always as I am miserable.*

On the night he wrote that letter Oliver took the tramcar along the Kennington Road. He went to say good-bye to Livvy O'Brien and Doris Fortescue. They were the only friends with whom he would clasp hands before his going.

It was very late at night, and he guessed they would just have returned from the theatre.

But only Livvy was in the rooms.

"Doris is on tour," she said. "She has got a part in 'The Little White Mouse.' I feel fearfully alone."

Livvy wore a blue dressing-jacket, and her hair was uncoiled. Oliver had never seen her looking so pretty, he thought, and he was amused to see her blush, as shyly as a schoolgirl, when he came in.

"You must go in twenty minutes. We keep the proprieties here, you know."

She smiled in her coy, impudent way, and her soft, black Irish eyes sparkled at him.

"Twenty minutes! And I have such a lot to say!"

"You look pale," said Livvy. "Have you been ill?"

He put down his hat and gloves, and warmed his hands at her fire.

"I think I have. I have been worried almost to death."

"About money?"

"Yes; that and other things. I have to cut everything. I am going away—into the country."

"A flitting?"

She smiled whimsically at that.

"Sure, and I am sorry. We shall miss you, Roly."

"You will be the only one to miss me, Livvy. I haven't another friend in the world."

He sat on the edge of the table and heaved a tremendous sigh.

"Melancholy Jacques!" said Livvy.

"Yes, life is a melancholy business. It's this cursed poverty, and the general cussedness of things. How do you manage to keep so cheerful, Livvy? Teach me the secret!"

"Smiling hurts less than crying. Don't you know that?"

"Yet I expect you have rough times sometimes, don't you?"

"Pretty rough."

She put her arms across the table, and played with some ink-spots on the red cloth at the tips of her fingers.

"It's not so much the present. It's the future that scares me."

"How do you mean?"

"The future of a third-rate actress is a hopeless kind of thing. Every day makes me a little older. I get the creeps when my birthdays come round and tell me that I am a year older than the one before. We don't last very long after the first grey hair and the first sign of crowsfeet about the eyes."

"You needn't worry, Livvy. You have got neither of those things yet."

Livvy took a coil of her hair, and held it over the sleeve of her blue bed-jacket.

"Look! Isn't that a silver thread?"

Oliver bent over her and lifted up her beautiful coil. With quick fingers he plucked out the grey hair.

"It is gone now, anyhow."

She gave a little laughing cry, and said that she had pulled out six like that.

"I am getting old. I am twenty-nine."

"By Jove! You look about eighteen!"

Oliver was astonished. He had never guessed that she was five years older than himself.

"I have a terror of getting old. The thought of it makes me shiver. I lie awake at night wondering what I shall do when I am withered and ugly. Funny, isn't it?"

She laughed with a strange gaiety at her own melancholy thoughts.

Then she put her hand on Oliver's sleeve and said, "Can you think what it will feel like when I go to a call for chorus girls and hear the manager say, 'Nothing for you, miss; we asked for *young* girls'? Have you ever heard those words and seen the awful look in the eyes of the poor creature who is turned away?"

"No," said Oliver. "But it will never come to that with you, dear girl."

"Oh, it is bound to come. Unless——"

She sighed, with a "Heigh-ho, poor little me."

"I used to hope I should get married. But that little dream is fading."

"Oh, surely not!" said Oliver. "There are heaps of fellows who would be proud to have you."

Livvy laughed again.

"Oh, I have had heaps of lovers. But, alack-a-day, one by one they go away, you see. They flirt with me on tour and then forget."

"Do you let them flirt with you?" said Oliver.

She turned her head and looked into his eyes rather proudly.

"I have never fooled about. I have always played straight. I'm Irish, you see."

"You are an Irish rose," said Oliver. "You are worthy of any man's love."

She put her hands on his shoulders and looked up quite frankly into his face.

'I wish you loved me, Oliver. Sometimes I half hoped——"

He touched her hair, and let his hand linger in her tresses.

"If I were not so poor——"

"Hush! Don't think I want you to pretend. I can read you like a book, Roly."

"Let us wait a bit. One of these days I may come back with a little money—enough to make a nest for you, Livvy."

She shook her head, and looked at him with teasing eyes.

"What a boy you are! Do you think I believe that fairy-tale?"

He put his arms about her, and kissed her on the lips. At that moment he believed he loved her, as once (a few weeks ago) he had loved Katherine.

"That was wicked of you!" said Livvy, blushing deeply. "I have never let any man do that before."

She thrust him away, but was not angry.

"You must go now. It is much too late for any young gentleman to sit in my rooms."

Oliver was not in a hurry to go.

"I should like to stay. I should like to stay with you

always. When I leave you I shall go out into the cold, a very lonely man, Livvy. But I will come back. One fine day I will come back."

"Maybe you will find me waiting," said Livvy. "But, somehow—do you know?—I don't think you will come back. You are going away like the other boys I have known. . . . Good-bye, Roly. Good luck to you."

She held out her hands to him, and he took both of them, and pressed them together and kissed them.

"Luck and I are strangers."

Livvy went to a drawer in a wooden cabinet, and rummaged among some handkerchiefs and things.

"Here is a little charm. It will bring you luck. Will you wear it in remembrance of me?"

It was a silver medal—some religious token.

"It will help keep the old devil at bay," said Livvy.

"Most useful!" said Oliver, putting it in his waistcoat pocket.

She almost pushed him out of her room, but before closing the door again she pulled his head down to her breast and kissed him on the forehead.

"Think of me sometimes—and be good."

As Oliver went down the stairway his heart was quite melted. He did not know that he cared for Livvy quite so much. He was tempted to alter all his plans now and stay in London. With the little Irish rose he would not be quite alone, nor utterly miserable.

Yet the next morning at ten found him on the railway platform, in a tweed suit, and with a new Gladstone bag.

He whistled to himself softly as he stood by the bookstall. On a spring morning, with the country calling to him, a young man of twenty-four does not find it easy to wear a hang-dog face. Oliver Lumley left London and the scenes of his failure with surprising cheerfulness.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE THRESHOLD OF FATE

OLIVER walked up the High Street of Windlesham, staring in the shop windows of the small market town in the heart of the Worcestershire woodlands.

In half an hour he learnt quite a lot about the character of the town and the people, but was still left wondering what freak of brain had impelled him to come the long journey to a place in which he was an absolute stranger, in which there was no possible means of livelihood, and where he had not yet found the house of Virginia Garland, his unknown correspondent.

When he had found it, what then ? Doubtless the lady would give him tea and hope that he was very well. What good would that do to a young man up against a brick wall of life ?

He had asked himself these questions early in the morning, before taking his ticket at Paddington. In the cold light of day he had lost the warm glow of his imagination, in which the vague figure of Virginia Garland beckoned to him as a lady of good succour. But he took the ticket.

He had asked himself the same question when, sitting in the corner of a third-class railway carriage, he watched the landscape fly past, with the silver coils of winding rivers, with the sun gleaming on the whitewashed houses of villages on the hillsides and in the valleys, with meadows and woods so brightly green on this first day of June that they looked like oil-paintings by Royal Academicians, freshly varnished, and quite unnatural.

When he stepped out of Windlesham railway station, ignoring the genial signs of three cab-drivers he was mildy amused by his own absurdity. This amusement increased so that he laughed aloud when he stood outside a milliner's shop in the High Street, staring at some hand-made lace and elaborate tea-cosies.

A little old lady with white hair, who was dusting her counter, watched the handsome young man outside the window, and wondered why he should laugh at her beautiful needlework. She could not guess that the young man had not even seen her tea-cosies, but was laughing, not in a mirthful way, at his own folly.

He had luncheon at the White Bear, a noble old inn with a square courtyard and timbered walls and immense chimney-stacks and low-ceilinged rooms panelled in dark oak.

As he was eating his cold beef and pickles, he listened to the conversation of a dozen young farmers in homespun suits and cloth gaiters, who were making a prodigious meal and drinking beer out of pewter pots as bright as silver. Outside the window Oliver could see in the market-square their gigs with empty shafts. They spoke in a broad, full-flavoured dialect, and laughed heartily for no apparent reason. They roared with laughter when one of them drank a pint of beer at one draught, and then called for more. Oliver envied their high spirits.

After the meal he went into the bar and spoke to a buxom young woman with yellow hair, who was reading *The Windlesham Gazette* with her elbows on the counter.

" Can you tell me where Miss Virginia Garland lives ? She calls her house ' The Rookery.' "

" Funny thing ! " said the young woman.

" What's funny ? "

" I was just reading her name."

She pointed to a paragraph in the paper :

Miss Virginia Garland entertained the Sunday-school children of St. Ursula's in her beautiful garden yesterday. The Vicar was present, and made a brief speech, full of his accustomed wit and humour. The children played games on the lawn, including an egg-and-spoon race, in which the Vicar was an enthusiastic competitor. We are glad to learn that Miss Garland is in better health.

" Has she been ill, then ? " asked Oliver.

" She's always delicate," replied the young lady behind the bar. " We don't see her often in the town, and never when the wind is in the east."

She told Oliver the way to The Rookery.

" You can't mistake it. Straight up the street. Last

house on the right, with a high wall round the garden."

Oliver would have been glad to ask more questions about the lady whom he had travelled so far to see, but the farmers now came into the bar and monopolised the attention of the young woman.

He went out of the White Bear, and walked up the High Street in the direction of The Rookery. But he stopped to look in the shop windows again, overtaken by a strange nervousness. He was half-inclined to go to the railway station and take the next train to town. He stared at the picture postcards of Gaiety actresses in a stationer's shop, and tried to think out the line of his conversation with Miss Garland. In his letters to her he had been candid in self-revelation. It put him into an awkward position.

A governess-cart full of chattering children, with a prim nurse drew up at a confectioner's shop. A pony-chaise driven by an old lady stopped at the greengrocer's.

Oliver wondered if by any chance the old lady might be Virginia Garland. The idea staggered him. It was the first time he had ever pictured the woman with whom he had corresponded as anything but young and beautiful, But it was just as likely that she was old enough to be his grandmother.

He became convinced that this lady with white curls under a black bonnet giving orders to the greengrocer, who had come out on to the pavement and was stroking the pony's nose, was Miss Garland herself. He was relieved when the man said, " Yes, Miss Holiday. You shall have them in half an hour, Miss Holiday. Certainly, Miss Holiday."

A high dog-cart came rattling round the market-square, and then with a clatter of hoofs pu'led up outside the stationer's shop. A smart little groom held the horse's head, while the lady, who had been driving, put one foot on the step and jumped lightly down.

Oliver, standing at the shop window, turned to look at her. She was tall, and in a tightly fitting costume of light brown cloth, showing the lines of a full and graceful figure. She wore a fawn-coloured felt hat, turned up on one side and Oliver noticed the colour of her hair, which

was of a rich chestnut. She turned her face towards him as she went into the shop, and their eyes met. They were startling eyes, bold and challenging, and her face was of an unusual type for a country town. It was an oval face, with a long, full mouth, and softly-rounded chin. There was a flush of bright colour on her cheeks, not quite natural in its glow, thought Oliver. Anyhow, she was a striking figure as she jumped from the dog-cart and went into the shop. The bold glance of her eyes left Oliver with an uncomfortable feeling down his backbone.

Again the thought came to him, "Is that Virginia Garland?" If so, there would be an adventure at his journey's end.

He waited in the doorway of another shop until the lady came out again. She turned her head to the right and left, as though searching for him, and again their eyes met. Her long, full lips seemed to soften into the faintest smile. Then she sprang up again to her seat on the dog-cart. He saw a glimpse of a brown stocking and a well-shaped leg. She jerked the ribbons, the little groom folded his arms on the back seat. The lady with the chestnut hair drove at a very smart pace—in the direction of The Rookery.

"Good lord!" said Oliver. "If that is Virginia Garland, I shall have to be careful."

He walked slowly beyond the market-square and beyond the few shops, along a wide street lined with beech-trees. It was half-past three, and the afternoon sun gave a rich colour to the dark red-brick Georgian houses on either side of the way. With their many-sashed windows and square oak doors between fluted pillars, these straight, plain houses had a fine, old-fashioned dignity. Nobody went in or out of them, but their door-knockers were brightly polished, and their steps were as white as snow. There was a sense of perfect peace and quietude in this old High Street—of comfortable security from all the worries and troubles of modern life. To a man who had come straight from the rush and roar of London it was restful.

Oliver walked on until the line of houses stopped abruptly, and gave place to three or four cottages with

thatched roofs and small front gardens. Not yet had he seen The Rookery.

There was a young girl in the garden of the last cottage. She was sitting on a wooden chair, knitting so swiftly that her needles seemed like quivering sparks of light.

"Can you tell me where The Rookery is, my dear?" asked Oliver, leaning over the gate.

The girl dropped her knitting into her lap, and then, getting up, walked nearer to the gate. She was a tall, plump lass of eighteen or so, in a cotton frock, with cheeks blooming like roses, and a coil of flaxen hair in which the sun glinted.

"Did you say The Rookery?"

"Yes; Miss Garland's."

She gave a giggle as though amused by his ignorance.

"Why, it's just yonder."

She pointed to a square, grey house beyond a high wall next to the cottage.

"Everybody knows Miss Garland's."

"Well, I don't," said Oliver. "Anyhow, I am much obliged to you."

He paused, and said, "You're a pretty girl. What's your name?"

"What's that to you?"

The girl grinned up at him, a hand on her broad hip.

"True," said Oliver, "it's nothing to me."

He smiled back at her, and, taking his arms over the garden gate, turned away

The girl called after him.

"Hi!"

He looked back and said:

"Yes?"

"My name is Alice."

"Well, good-afternoon, Alice," said Oliver.

He walked the length of the high wall until he came to the square, grey house. There, plain enough on the wooden gate, was painted in white letters, "The Rookery."

A broad drive, with not a weed in its gravel, led up to a flight of steps and to the front door beyond a stone portico. It was a big, solid house, with a gabled roof and great chimneys. Every window had a white muslin

curtain. As Oliver walked up the drive a strong, rich scent was wafted to him. It was the fragrance of a sweet-brier in the closely-trimmed hedges. There was an iron bell-handle at one side of the doorway, he pulled it, and as he heard the jingle of the bell the tinkling music set his heart vibrating with a queer emotion. At that moment Oliver knew that he was on the threshold of a great adventure in his life.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### VIRGINIA GARLAND

To Oliver's inquiry, "Is Miss Garland at home?" a young maidservant in a black dress and spotless cap and apron said, "Yes, sir. Will you come in?"

She led him through a square hall, in which a log fire was burning, to a large room at the back of the house. Oliver gave his name to the maid, and then was left alone in the room. A pair of tall French windows were wide open, and he looked out into a big garden with a long lawn below a terrace with an ivy-covered balustrade. At the end of the garden was a rustic summer-house, and in the centre of the lawn was a dove-cot. Somewhere the doves were cooing with a gentle murmur. The pathways were bordered with standard roses, and the flower-beds were filled with masses of delicate colour. The fragrance of them stole into the room, and in a bowl on the piano there was a bouquet of June roses which were shedding petals upon the polished wood. The room was panelled in white, and furnished in an old-fashioned way, with its chairs covered with flowered chintz. There were oval mirrors on the walls, and coloured engravings by Bartolozzi, and over the mantelshelf was a large oil-painting of a beautiful woman, like one of Sir Joshua Reynold's ladies.

Oliver's quick eyes had only just made the survey of the room when the door opened, and he knew that he saw Virginia Garland for the first time.

She stood in the doorway for a moment, and he saw that she was a woman of about thirty-five, rather tall and frail, with a pale, delicate face and large grey eyes. Her light brown hair was parted in the middle, brushed smoothly down and looped over the ears. She wore a soft grey dress, with white lace about her shoulders.

"Mr. Oliver Lumley?"

She seemed to ask if it could be true that this was really Oliver.

"Yes. Are you Miss Garland?"

Oliver went forward quickly. Then he noticed that the lady leant on a stick, and that she seemed lame.

She took his hand, and held it for a moment clasped in her own, which was long and thin.

"I always hoped you would come to see me."

A slight colour had crept into her pale face.

"I did not guess you were so young," she said.

"Nor had I any idea that you were so——"

"So old?"

She smiled as she asked the question.

"So beautiful," said Oliver.

He had not meant to say that. He had just blurted out his sense of surprise. The real Virginia Garland was so different from his dream-picture. Yet he was stirred with admiration for the perfect delicacy and purity of her face. In those grey eyes of hers there was the spirit of peace and truth.

At his confession of her beauty she blushed quite deeply now, but was not angry.

"No one has ever said that before! I should be glad to think I was beautiful; but my mirrors are too candid."

She spoke with perfect simplicity.

Then she said, "Will you get me a chair? I am a little lame."

Oliver sprang to a chair, and brought it to her with an apology. She sat down, and rested her stick in the folds of her gown. Oliver sat on the sofa, a little distance away. He wondered what reason he should give for coming to Windlesham.

But she did not ask for a reason. She made her own suggestion.

"Have you come in search of a country cottage? I have always thought that you ought to leave London, and write in greater peace. From what you told me, there were too many distractions, and the noise of the town was too wearing to your nerves."

"Horribly wearing. It tore my nerves to tatters. Besides——"

"Yes?"

Her large grey eyes rested steadily upon his face.

"To tell the truth," he said, "I found life too expensive. You see, I am frightfully poor. I found myself getting into debt."

He was startled at his own candour. He had not been a minute in the room with this woman, yet in her presence his pose and affectation seemed to fall from him. He could not lie or pretend before those truthful eyes.

"You told me you were poor," said Virginia Garland.

She was silent for a moment, and then said:

"It is strange. This is our first meeting, and yet I seem to know you so well. It was good of you to write me those long letters. I looked forward to them very much. You see I am lonely here. I cannot move about very much. My life is practically enclosed within the four walls of this house and garden. So, when your letters came, telling me of your struggles in London, it seemed to bring me in touch with the great world outside. I have always hoped for your success."

"Your sympathy has been very encouraging. But I have been a failure."

"Oh, you are too young for such a word!" said Miss Garland. "And, indeed, your stories have been a success. My friends in Windlesham have always looked out for them. The vicar likes them very much. So does the doctor."

Oliver laughed.

"Evidently I have more friends here than I guessed."

"You must write a novel," said Miss Garland—"a successful novel. Is not that the way to make money?"

"If the novel is successful—yes. But that begs the question."

"Oh, it *must* be successful!"

Virginia Garland laughed now.

"You must take the little cottage I wrote about. It is very quiet and pretty, and I am sure if you write a novel there it will be a success. You will have no interruptions, and the flowers in the garden will give beautiful thoughts to you."

"It is not a bad idea," said Oliver, answering her smile. "How much is the rent?"

Virginia Garland became slightly embarrassed.

"It belongs to me. I have not let it since last summer. We could decide upon the rent afterwards—if the novel is a success."

Oliver understood that she offered it to him rent free.

"It is immensely kind of you. It sounds delightful."

"I will take you to see it after tea. Shall we have that in the garden? It is quite warm to-day."

"Your garden is like a dream," said Oliver.

"It is my little dream-world. Come, I will show it to you?"

She stood up from her chair, leaning slightly on her stick. But for her lameness she would have been an elegant and graceful woman. The light from the French windows fell upon her face, and touched her hair, and gave her a strangely spiritual look. It was a pity, thought Oliver, that she should have to hobble into her garden.

At the top of the stone steps leading down to the lawn she said:

"I am afraid I shall have to ask you to lend me your arm. Do you mind?"

Oliver strode to her side, and she leaned quite heavily upon his arm, and went down the steps one at a time.

"I have been like this since childhood. I used to pray that my hip would be cured. Now I pray that I may bear it cheerfully."

"It keeps you a prisoner," said Oliver, with pity in his voice.

"Ah, but it is a beautiful prison, is it not?"

She looked round upon her garden, and there was love in her eyes. A white dove came fluttering down from the cot. It preened itself on the lawn about her, puffing out its white breast. It seemed to Oliver that as she went down the path by the lawn the roses gave out a deeper fragrance, and that as she passed a bank of sweet peas, rioting in colour, they nodded their heads to her. From the summer-house two shaggy sheep-dogs came out, stretching their limbs, and yawning. They sniffed round Oliver, and then gambolled round their mistress. She called to them:

"Lie down, Ranter. Down, Rory. Wicked fellows!"

A sun-dial was on the lawn, and she said how often she had watched the shadow creep across the hours here.

Four or five garden-chairs were arranged in a half-circle in front of the summer-house, and from one of them she picked up a book, lying face-downwards. Oliver took the book from her—it was a volume of Ruskin's "Modern Painters"—and arranged the chair for her.

"You have not seen half my garden," she said. "But this is the prettiest part. Behind are kitchen gardens, and my herbarium and the glass-houses. Winter and summer I find my pleasure here."

"Don't you pine for a change sometimes?" asked Oliver.

"Not now. I have got over that. When I was younger I used to go abroad. My father took me to France and Italy. But it made me so tired. Now that I am alone—my father died three years ago and my mother when I was still a child—I do not care to go about. So here I do my gardening (at least I give orders to my gardeners), and when the weather is warm enough I sit here, and read and read."

She laughed, and said that Oliver could not guess how many books she read during a year. Novels gave her most pleasure, yet for duty's sake she read a great deal of history, and all the poetry, of course, she could lay hands on.

"I am a faithful friend to minor poets," she said. "I buy all their little books."

She asked Oliver whether he wrote poetry, and was disappointed when he said that he could not confess to a single verse.

The maidservant came across the lawn with a silver tea-tray, and placed it on a small wooden table. The sun was glowing with a golden light. The doves cooed with an incessant murmur. Birds were twittering in the hedges, and from the tops of the elm trees at the far end of the garden rooks were cawing—cawing in a drowsy monotone. A church bell struck four. The silver notes chimed sweetly beyond the high grey wall. There was a great peace in the garden. Oliver felt its benediction upon him.

After tea, during which Virginia Garland spoke of books and flowers, she led him through the kitchen garden, and past a long line of glass-houses, and then through an

old-fashioned iron-studded door in the high grey wall. It led out into a narrow, winding lane—Whirligig Lane she called it—and presently they came to a thatched cottage on the top of a steep bank, where ferns and wild flowers grew luxuriantly. Some steps had been cut into this bank, and a little white gate at the head of them opened into the cottage garden.

Oliver had to give his hand to Miss Garland to help her up the steps, and she panted a little in the doorway of the cottage, and said, "Oh, I am no good for climbing!"

"Why, it is furnished!" said Oliver, peeping through the window into the sitting-room.

"Of course! It has been a hobby of mine. I had a married couple here once during the summer months, and made it as dainty as possible for them. But they were afraid of the owls which hooted in the trees at night. Fancy being afraid of owls."

She led the way inside, and told Oliver that when a fire had been lighted for a few hours it would be quite cosy.

"Look, here you could write your novel!" She pointed to a writing-desk in the sitting-room, which was furnished simply enough, with rush-bottomed chairs, a small oak table, an old oak chest, and the writing-desk itself. The kitchen was a small place; but on a high dresser was plenty of china, and the grate was brightly polished, with pots and pans upon the stove.

"We always keep the place clean and bright," said Miss Garland. "Look, here is the bedroom. Is it not a pretty place?"

It was a fairy-tale bedroom, with a great oak beam across the plastered ceiling and a lattice window looking out to a green field. On a white-wood dressing-table was an oval mirror, and there was a miniature chest of drawers, and a big cupboard, a bed draped round with white muslin, and a wash-hand stand with white china on which red roses bloomed.

"A man should have good dreams here!" said Oliver.

"I should be very happy if you cared to stay here," said Miss Garland.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and told him in a simple, practical way of how she would have to get the bed aired

for him, and the rooms warmed, and of how, if he came, she would get a village girl to wait on him.

"There is a girl named Alice, who wants some work to do to help her people. She lives in a cottage next to The Rookery wall."

"I think I know Alice," said Oliver. "She told me the way here. A pretty girl."

"Yes, pretty—and good, I think. She sings in the choir."

So it was all arranged. Oliver was to take up his dwelling in Myrtle Cottage the very next night. For one night he would stay at the White Bear.

He walked back with Virginia Garland to The Rookery. The sun was beginning to lose its splendour, and there was a beautiful rosiness in the garden and purple shadows in the paths between the hedges. He stayed talking in the drawing-room until the dusk came, and he saw Virginia Garland's face in a pale half-light which gave a mystery to it. He was astonished how completely her simplicity of manner had put him at his ease. She was as sympathetic in her speech as in the letters she had sent to Barton Street. It seemed to him, curiously, that her lameness made her more charming and beautiful.

As he said good-bye and thanked her with boyish warmth for her great kindness, he noticed the cool, soft touch and the transparency of the hand that clasped his own.

"I am so glad to know you at last," he said, "after all our letters to each other."

Her grey eyes smiled at him.

"Somehow I thought you would come here one day. I seemed to be waiting for you."

## CHAPTER XXX

### A COCKNEY IN THE WOODS

OLIVER, like the young married couple who had lived in Myrtle Cottage, did not like the owls. Their plaintive hooting, as he sat alone some evenings, seemed to him like lost souls wailing in the night. Sometimes it seemed to him that witch voices were calling him, and he was afraid.

The silence also, and the impenetrable darkness of country nights, got upon his nerves. The lane outside his cottage was a black tunnel when no moon was up, or, if the moon shone, the play of light and shadow through the leaves startled him. As a Cockney—or at least a Suburbanite, bred and born—he did not understand the significance of country sounds. Once when he was walking back from The Rookery at night he had a shock which gave him "goose-flesh," and made a coward of him. It seemed that some human being was asleep, close to him, across the hedge. He heard the regular rhythm of its lungs, the deep, sighing breath that was half a snore, but horribly loud for an ordinary mortal. It was as though some hulking giant were stretched out in drunken slumber. Of course it was nothing but a harmless cow, as he soon found out: but it shocked his nerves.

It was worse to sit alone at night, writing, in his little sitting-room. The silence closed about him as though his ears were stuffed with cotton-wool, until suddenly some queer sound made his pulse jump. It was the creak of a cane chair, or a scratching at the woodwork of the wall, or the movement of an invisible insect, like the ticking of a watch. Once, when a big fat moth circled over his oil-lamp and then flopped on to his paper, beads of cold sweat broke out upon him, and he was strangely unnerved.

For the first few nights he suffered real torture when the darkness came, though he tried to grapple with his

cowardice and laugh at his terrors. One night his brain reeled to the verge of madness.

He was sitting with his table drawn close to the fire, when he suddenly jerked up his head, and listened intently with strained ears. Surely there were footsteps outside. He could hear the pad of soft feet, up and down, up and down, on the cobbled path leading from the garden gate. Then his head was drawn round, as by invisible hands, towards the window. There, looking in upon him, was a white, leprous face, with two burning eyes. He saw a glint as of fire in the eyes. A moment later the face had disappeared. He sat motionless, stone-cold, with the pupils of his eyes dilated, a figure of fright. The face appeared again, and stared at him horribly. He gave a strangled cry, and seizing a wooden stool rushed to the door, bursting it open with a kick. As he staggered outside, a grey wolfish form slipped across the cottage garden. In the moonlight he saw that it was a lonely sheep-dog. Only that! It was ludicrous. But Oliver when he went back slowly to his room did not laugh. His face was white and drawn. He had a haunted look. He wondered how long he could stand his life in Windlesham with these night-alarms.

Undoubtedly his nerves were overwrought. He suffered from dejection bordering on melancholia. A thousand times he cursed himself for a fool for having abandoned London. Remorse, self-accusation, and regret weighed him down, so that he sat with his head in his hands, with bowed shoulders. He had made a pretty idiot of himself! At the outset he had blighted his career. His high, fantastic hopes had ended in debt and dismal failure. He had failed in his work and in his love. He thought of Katherine and yearned for her. He roamed over his adventures with her, he lived again through the hours by her fireside, and his soul cried out because he was cut off from that life, which was now a memory and a dream. He shed silly tears in his loneliness, and pitied himself intensely. It was his cursed temperament that had played him false—his temperament and his poverty. Poverty was the root of all evil. As Katherine said, it was easy to be virtuous with a good banking account.

These miserable thoughts kept him in low spirits, yet he did not quite lose his gift of laughter. He laughed, and he felt it was good to laugh, when Alice Featherfew, the cottage lass, came to clean out his rooms and cook his meals. She was a strapping wench, and as pretty as the Goose-Girl at the Well (with the same flaxen hair and blue eyes and milk-white skin), and as impudent as a saucy child.

She had no reverence for a young man who wanted waiting on, though she was glad enough to earn his money. In the morning she would come with a long broom, and make a great dust and clatter with it, sweeping a room like a sturdy gardener with loose weeds on the path. She swept against Oliver's feet as he sat at his desk, and said, " Hi, can't you get out of the way ? How do you expect me to do my work ? "

She was filled with child-like astonishment at his personal belongings. His patent boots with cloth uppers provoked her laughter.

" They be fit for maids, not men," she said. " I do fancy you walking in ploughed fields with them ! "

He had hung out his dress suit to air, and she tiptoed to his trousers, and put a smudgy finger down the silk stripe with a " Lor' now, an' dearie me ! " She desired to know why his waistcoat was cut with a hole in the middle, and why he wore tails to his coat like a jackdaw.

If, obviously, he had nothing to do, and sat on the kitchen table swinging his legs and watching her with an amused smile, listening to her countrified chatter, she invited him not to be a lazy-bones, but lend a hand with the work. So he got into the habit of making the bed with her, and she taught him how to fold the sheets round the bolster and how to tuck the blankets in at the bottom.

" Begin your bed at the foot," she said, " and you'll sleep like a boog in a roog,"—though it puzzled her, she declared, how he had grown so big without learning these simple things.

She gave him lessons in peeling potatoes and chopping up carrots, and was amazed at his clumsiness, and then when she had set him to work she would stand with her hands on her hips laughing at him, or sit on a wooden

stool, with her red hands clasped in her lap, giving him the gossip of Windlesham, and the characters of her neighbours, whom she summarised as mostly bad. It seemed that her father beat her with a broomstick when he was in drink or "put out," and that her mother scolded and bullied the livelong day.

"It be real peace to coom round here," she said, "for all your nonsense."

For Miss Virginia Garland she had words of praise, qualified by a little criticism.

"A kind body," she said, "and means well, but just a poor frail thing."

According to Alice Featherfew, Miss Garland had a nasty habit of poking her nose, as far as her legs would carry it, into other people's cottages, and she could smell a speck of dirt a yard away. She told the mothers how to manage their babies, and the children how to behave at school, and how to say their prayers. She also conducted the church choir, of which Alice herself was a member. They put up with the fussy ways of Miss Garland because she was open-handed with her money, and did needlework all the year round for the women and babes, and brought them medicine and soups and blankets and goodies when they "took ill." But her eyes made Alice skeery. They looked one through and through, and she was very "strict." Hot-tempered, too, at times. Alice had seen her talk to a man who had been ill-using a young girl until he was as white as a puff-ball, and all of a tremble. Miss Garland's eyes were two fires, and her voice like the high note in the organ, the one that thrills down the backbone. Alice would not like to go wrong with Miss Garland's eyes within a mile of her. They would search out a secret in the middle of a haystack.

Oliver was interested in these sidelights on Virginia Garland's character. They filled out his own impressions as he came to know her better, but always with a sense of mystery lurking behind his knowledge. He was also interested in Alice, this child of the countryside, with her candid speech and her way of stating facts and fancies.

He called her his Cinderella, and sometimes the Goose-Girl, or Patient Griselda. She knew none of

those heroines of folk-lore, so he told the stories to her, and she listened, wide-eyed, with her lips parted. She asked for more, and more, but he said that he must be paid for his trouble, a kiss for each story, which was a cheap bargain for her. She let him kiss her, shyly at first, with blushing and giggling, but afterwards liked it, story or no story.

Meanwhile Oliver went often to The Rookery—every day at some hour of the afternoon or evening—and the spirit of Virginia Garland became entwined with his life during those weeks in Windlesham.

She had begun her friendship with him by charity. We have seen what use he made of it in London, and now she sent many gifts to his cottage. He was living rent free, and soon he realised, not without relief, for he was practically destitute, that he would never starve in Myrtle Cottage. Chickens, nicely trussed, appeared mysteriously in the small larder. One of the gardeners would come to the cottage door with new-laid eggs and pots of cream, or with butter fresh from the dairy and loaves hot from the oven. A podgy-faced boy of sixteen or so—he drove Miss Garland's pony-chaise, and weeded the paths under her vigilant eye—came down with jars of honey or newly-baked cakes or bottles of home-made wine. This profusion of gifts was delightful but embarrassing. Oliver complained to Miss Garland that she had made a poor pensioner of him, and that she was sapping his manhood by such charity.

She declared that it was a charity of his to relieve her store-cupboards and her kitchen gardens.

"If you do not take these things," she said, "they will be wasted and spoilt."

"Then I take them," said Oliver, "with a protest, and a grateful heart. Immensely grateful, dear Miss Garland."

He told her that he felt like Jean Jacques Rousseau, with Madame de Warens whom he called his *chère maman*.

Miss Garland blushed at this.

"She was not a very nice woman, was she?"

"Oh, charming, and very kind to a poor devil of a literary man."

"I have forgotten," said Miss Garland.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### RURAL SOCIETY

Miss Garland had good friends, who came to see her often, and called her "my dear." Oliver was introduced to them, and they said how charmed they were to meet a distinguished literary man. Although they lived in big old Georgian houses in the town, and kept servants and gardeners of their own, and drove up to The Rookery in some state—at least, in a brougham with a quiet, well-fed horse and a discreet and well-fed coachman—they did not look down upon him because he dwelt in a tiny cottage. They took for granted that a literary gentleman should be poor.

Most of them were elderly ladies, and when they sat on Virginia Garland's lawn taking tea with her, they reminded Oliver of grey doves—they were so gentle and so placid. There was one old lady among them with silver hair, and a delicate old face that must have been beautiful in her girlhood. She was the Dowager Countess of Buntingford, and lived in an old Jacobean mansion a few miles away from Windlesham. She dressed always in lavender silk and a little bonnet with silk ribbons, and she had the gracious manner and exquisite courtesy of a French marquise of the old regime.

Her first greeting of Oliver was characteristic, and made him her friend.

"You are a very handsome young man, my dear," she said. "Forty-five years ago I should have fallen in love with you."

Oliver lifted her withered old hand—so white and thin—to his lips, and said that he was sorry he was forty-five years too young for such an honour. That won her heart, and she patted him on the hand, and said, "I am not too old yet to love pretty boys."

When they met again in the garden, she took him

on one side, and said, "Young man, how many hearts have you broken? Tell me that. You have wicked black eyes."

"Black, but not wicked," said Oliver.

"Well, do not break my dear Virginia's heart. Promise me! I see a strange light in her face when you come walking across the grass. Oh, I have very sharp eyes myself."

Oliver blushed like a schoolboy.

"Lady Buntingford, you embarrass me! Please do not say such things to Miss Garland."

She whispered into his ear.

"I can keep a secret!"

Then she laughed—a silvery, tinkling laughter.

"Oh, I love to see young folks love one another. I like to watch the mating of love-birds."

There was another old lady who came to The Rookery lawn. She came up Windlesham High Street in a low pony-trap driven by a thin, clean-shaven old man in rusty black and a silk hat that had suffered in many rains and snows. He was her butler, coachman, and gardener, and ruled her with a rod of iron. Yet she was a sturdy and strong-willed old woman of eighty-five, with a lot of strength in her old bones still, as she declared frequently with pride. Miss Purchase was her name, and she had crinkled, rosy, old cheeks, like an apple laid up long in the store-cupboard, and bright blue eyes. She always wore a black gimp dress, and a white woollen shawl over her shoulders, and as she came across the lawn, clasping a big umbrella, she looked like an old gipsy woman.

Miss Purchase probably owed her long life to an intense interest in the affairs of her neighbours. As she said, it kept her brain active. There was no scandal in Windlesham, but that she inquired into the details of it and spread the news as an awful warning to others. No baby shed its wings before coming into the little world of Windlesham without Miss Purchase having fore-knowledge of its coming. She seemed to know the secrets of every cottage, and to keep a catalogue of skeletons in the cupboards of Georgian houses. She dragged them forth, and rattled their bones at the tea-table.

Not often, however, at Virginia Garland's tea-table. In the middle of a tit-bit of gossip she would stop suddenly, and say, "My dear Virginia, if you look at me with those sharp swords in your eyes you will make me dumb."

Or Virginia Garland would hold up her finger warningly, and say, "Hush! No tittle-tattling!"

"No fiddlesticks!" said the old lady. "If I cannot narrate my little stories of human interest, I shall creep into my coffin."

She reproached Miss Garland for her severity.

"My dear, you are like one of those mediæval saints who lived on a pedestal above the market-place. I like people who come down to the human level."

On to the lawn behind the grey old house came other ladies, comfortable, complacent matrons, in rustling silks—they had the latest information about the dear vicar—and spinsters like Miss Garland herself, who had resigned themselves to unmarried life but still warmed their hearts before little altars of romance. In the distance, as Oliver walked towards them sometimes from the gate in the garden wall, he heard their quiet voices and silvery laughter, and as the sunlight fell upon their silks and satins, billowing upon the emerald carpet, he thought they made a charming picture of country peace. In the centre of them sat Virginia Garland, with her smooth hair and delicate face, serving at the tea-table, rather silent while the others talked, but smiling, and watchful for their comforts.

One day, as he was handing tea-cakes round, and bending towards old Lady Buntingford, he heard a clear woman's voice ring out in effusive greeting to Miss Garland.

"My dearest Virginia! Such an age——"

Looking up he saw a tall woman in a close-fitting fawn-coloured dress, with a felt hat turned up on one side above her chestnut hair. It was the lady whom he had seen driving in a high dog-cart during his first afternoon at Windlesham.

She kissed Miss Garland on both cheeks, and hoped the "dear thing" was feeling ever so well.

"Very well, thank you, Mrs. Percival," said Virginia Garland, in her quiet way. Oliver, who was quick to read the expression of her face, now saw that she was slightly disconcerted at the visit.

Mrs. Percival, as the lady was called, greeted some of the other visitors with smiling condescension and then turned her eyes full upon Oliver. He had met that bold stare before.

"May I be introduced?"

She had turned to Miss Garland, who said, "Mr. Oliver Lumley, the Hon. Mrs. Percival."

She gave him her hand, holding it high.

"The Lumleys of Westbrook?"

"No," said Oliver.

He did not tell the lady that he belonged to the Lumleys of Denmark Hill.

"Oh, I knew a Colonel Lumley once—a dear man. Quite the best dancer in Simla."

She sank with charming grace into a garden-chair, and said, "Bring me a cup of tea, Mr. Lumley, lest I die. It is really quite warm."

He brought her the tea, and she desired him to sit down and talk to her.

"It is so dull here in Windlesham. I meet so few people worth talking to."

"I am afraid I am not one of them," said Oliver with mock humility.

"Oh, no! I have heard *all* about you. You are a literary man, and you live in dear Miss Garland's cottage in the lane, and you take tea on the lawn almost every day, and she sends you the first fruits of her garden. I am so glad our dear Miss Garland has become a patron of literature, in the sweetest and most old-fashioned sense of the word."

She looked across to the lady whose name she had mentioned so often in one breath, and smiled at her.

But Virginia Garland did not return the smile. A slight flush crept into her face, and she said quite seriously:

"Mr. Lumley is one of my tenants. That is all the honour I may claim."

"A delightful honour! It must be so nice to have a

literary man at the other side of one's garden wall. So romantic ! "

She turned to Oliver.

" Tell me, what do you write about ? Love, I am sure." Oliver did not deny that love was often his theme.

" And what experience have you had ? " asked Mrs. Percival.

She laughed vivaciously at his embarrassment, and said, " Oh, you writing men ! "

A curious silence had fallen upon the other ladies. Old Lady Buntingford sat very stiff and straight, with her black-gloved hands in her lap. It gradually dawned on Oliver, while Mrs. Percival was talking to him about her horrors of exile as the wife of an invalid soldier, that this rather beautiful woman with the chestnut hair was not a welcome visitor on The Rookery lawn.

The lady herself seemed quite unconscious of the silent hostility towards her, or quite careless of it. She confined her conversation entirely to Oliver, and then after a quarter of an hour she sprang up and said, " I must positively go. But it is so delightful here. Miss Garland, I am sure, has the nicest tea in Windlesham."

She kissed Virginia Garland on each cheek again.

" Good-bye. I am so glad to see you looking stronger. Quite a colour in your cheeks, dear ! The effect perhaps of having a literary gentleman at the end of your garden."

She gave a high hand-shake to Oliver.

" You must come and dine with us. My husband would be so glad to see you. And I crave for a conversationalist."

With the greatest good-humour, and shading her face with her lace parasol, she went out of the garden, an elegant figure in the golden light of the afternoon.

" Upon my word," said the Dowager Lady Buntingford, " that woman should not be tolerated ! A bold, bad hussy ! "

She tapped Oliver's hand with her lorgnette.

" A dangerous creature, young man. Take an old woman's advice and have nothing to do with her."

" I do not think we know anything definite against her," said Miss Garland. " It is only her manner."

"Nothing definite!" said old Miss Purchase raising her hand. "My dear, if you would only let me tell the sheaf of stories I have collected."

"Pray spare us!" said Miss Garland carelessly. "Let us talk of flowers. They are always innocent and harmless."

"I dare say there would be scandals in the flower-beds if one only knew!" said Miss Purchase wistfully.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE GARDEN OF PEACE

It was a brilliant July, hot and sultry at noon, like the dog-days of August, cool and exquisite in the twilight, when shadows crept across the fields and rose-pink clouds floated in a pale sky, and the scent of flowers and of new-mown hay and of the fertile earth rose as a rich incense in the quivering air.

Upon the soul of Oliver Lumley there descended tranquillity. His restless heart beat to a steadier, quieter rhythm. It seemed to him at times that in the beauty of these Worcestershire woodlands he had got away from the fretfulness of life and had escaped from the snares of his own nature.

His face became richly sunburnt. There was a brighter light in his dark eyes. He walked with a springy step. The perfect health of young manhood gave him an exaltation of spirits, chasing away the melancholy and brooding thoughts that had overshadowed him on his first coming to Windlesham.

Yet at times this uplifting of mind and body was almost too great. It was a kind of natural intoxication, which startled him. There were hours when he seemed to be drunk with the beauty of the earth. London-bred, he did not know the names of the flowers in Virginia's garden, nor in the meadows and hedge-rows; he did not know the birds that sang in the beechwoods behind his cottage; but the colour-glories of the flowers and the ecstatic music of the song-birds thrilled his senses and filled him with an indefinable emotion, to the verge of silly tears.

Something seemed to have broken inside him—some hard crust. He lived in a melting mood, strangely sensuous in his sympathy with this Nature round him.

Once he was scared with himself. He was standing

on the bank of the river Windle, which coiled through the country-side. The sunlight had turned its water to crinkled gold. A score of larks were singing an endless song of love triumphant above fields of clover on the opposite bank. Meadowsweet grew about him where he stood, and its scent was wafted to him with every breath of wind. A church-bell was ringing. Its faint vibration made the air tremulous. Round a bend of the river a girl's voice was singing, and there was the lap of oars upon the water. Standing there alone, Oliver suddenly felt his heart beating wildly. His nostrils quivered, a yearning took possession of him, though for what he did not know and could not understand. It was a kind of hunger to be absorbed in this Nature, to be one with it.

Walking back through quiet woods to his cottage there were strange stirrings of romance in his heart. The eternal spirit of boyhood seemed to surge up in him. He desired an adventure in the wood. He peered down a glade, where the light fell aslant through the high branches, like a faun searching for a wood-nymph. But he saw only rabbits scuttling across the pathway and a bird with greenish plumage piping on a twig to a hidden mate.

At his garden gate he met Virginia Garland. She had watched him coming across the field and the stile, and laughed when he raised his head and saw her only when quite close.

"What were you thinking of so furiously? That great novel of yours?"

"No. I cannot write my silly trash when the sun is shining and the world's beauty calls out so loud."

He held his straw hat in his hand, and the sun streamed upon his dark hair and bronzed face and white flannels.

"Are you strong enough to walk a little? Let us go and sit under the trees and talk. I must play truant from work to-day."

"I am afraid you are too often a truant."

She put her hand upon his arm and they walked slowly back into the wood, and into the cool depths of it. Then Virginia Garland sat upon the trunk of a fallen tree. She took off her hat, and laid it in the

lap of her grey dress. Oliver lay down upon the peaty turf a yard away, with his elbows dug into the ground and his face propped in his hands. They were quite silent. In a thicket close by a bird was making little chitterings. Presently Oliver spoke.

"This is a wood of dreams."

"It is as real as life," said Virginia Garland. "See, there are dead leaves rotting on the ground, and up above green leaves. Presently they also will be dead, but others will come, and the beauty of life goes on."

"I hate to think of death," said Oliver. "Death and pain are horrible."

"One must look both in the face without flinching. I know what pain is. It has been my bedfellow. One day I shall meet the other. I shall not be afraid."

Oliver sat up, folding his arms on his knees.

"Sometimes I am rather afraid of *you*!" he said smiling at her.

"Of me? I am a frail, harmless thing!"

"You are immensely strong. Your spirit is inflexible."

"You make me out a hard woman," said Virginia Garland. "I hope I have a little charity."

"Yes, you are hard," said Oliver. "I believe you would be as hard as rock in a sea of temptation. But charity? Your heart pours it out."

"Hush!" said Miss Garland. "You do not know the secrets of my poor heart."

She looked down on Oliver from her tree-trunk seat, and there was a smiling tenderness in her eyes.

"Tell me some of them," said Oliver. "The wood is silent, and there are no eavesdroppers. You and I are quite alone in the world."

She shook her head and said:

"Hark at the bird on that bough. What a thrilling note!"

But Oliver did not listen. His eyes were fixed on the woman who sat on the fallen tree. Her smooth brown hair was just touched by a ray of light which struck through the leaves. Sitting there with her hat off and her hands in her lap she made a charming portrait.

She seemed to have grown younger since he had

known her. At his first meeting she had seemed to him almost middle-aged, but afterwards, and now, he caught the wistful look of a young girl in her face. She was looking upon the ground, and he saw how long and soft were the brown eyelashes that brushed her cheek, and how beautiful was the curve of her neck. Her face had no doll-like prettiness. It was pale and thin, but it reminded Oliver of one of Burne-Jones's dream-women.

Sometimes, it was quite true, she frightened him. There was something in her eyes and in her manner that made it impossible for him to adopt that light-hearted gallantry which came so easily to him with other women. She took all his words seriously, as though they meant precisely what he said, neither more nor less. That was embarrassing to a man who spoke often with exaggeration and sometimes thoughtlessly. She credited him also with ideals and principles of which he could speak glibly enough, but which, in his heart, he knew to be higher than his spiritual reach.

He had kept up the fiction, for instance, of a deep interest in the social condition of the London poor. He had spoken brave things about his "quest of truth." He had complained to her of the frivolity and insincerity of modern society. He had even deplored the spirit of Mammon which had taken possession of the nation.

"The money standard," he said, "is the measure of modern life. Oh, how I hate and loathe this greed of gold!"

She agreed with him, with enthusiasm, and praised him for following the path of poverty with a brave heart, in the pursuit of truth and beauty. That had shamed him. He blamed himself for insincerity. He hedged a little to save his own conscience, and told her that, after all, money in good hands was a great blessing, an immense power for good. But she hesitated to agree to that.

"My father has left me too much for a single woman, and subscriptions to charity lists are but miserable means of doing good in the world. This impersonal charity is so cold and unsatisfying."

After she had told him that, the thought of her wealth

haunted him. Her father had left her too much for a single woman, she said.

There were moments now when a strange question thrust itself into Oliver's brain. Had Virginia Garland fallen in love with him? He tried to put the question on one side as an impertinence, but it demanded an answer.

The first time it had come to him was one evening when he came into her drawing-room. It was dusk, and the candles had not been lighted, and Virginia was sitting with some white needle-work in her lap. But she was not sewing. Her hands were still, and she was staring out into the purple haze in the garden through the open French windows. She had not heard him come into the room until he spoke to her. Then she started and turned her head, and her face was suffused with a deep flush of colour.

"I thought you were not coming in this evening."

Her hand trembled a little in his clasp.

"I have one of my attacks of loneliness," she said. "Sometimes I feel the most lonely creature in the world. I am glad you have come."

Her voice was tremulous. There was a kind of hunger in her eyes for a moment as she looked up at him. Just for a swift second it seemed to Oliver that his presence had thrilled her. A moment later she was speaking to him in her tranquil way, calm and matter-of-fact.

Another day they were in the rose-garden. She was showing him her most precious specimens. She lifted their heads up in her delicate white fingers with a caressing touch.

"When I am gone," said Oliver, "I shall always think of you among the roses."

She turned and drew in her breath.

"You are not going yet? Are you tired of this country life?"

Her anxiety startled him, so that for a moment he could not answer. Then he said:

"I shall never be tired of this garden. My spirit will always walk in it. But sometimes I think I ought to get back to the bustle of the town. I am living too much on your bounty."

"Do not say that. You keep my cottage warm and

your friendship has made the month pass quickly. Generally the weeks are so long with me."

"They have been golden weeks. I shall never forget the peace of them and this beauty."

He looked round the garden, at the doves cooing on the emerald lawn, at the sun glinting on the marble dial, at the long, cool shadow flung across the grass from the gables of the grey, old house. Then it seemed to him that the charity of this lady, in whose cottage he lived, and who had opened her house and garden to him, was a charming idyll, touched with romance. He thought again of the young Rousseau, poor like himself, with the same temperamental sensibilities, who for four years had lived such an idyll with Madame de Warens in the sylvan retreat of Les Charmettes. Virginia Garland had given him sanctuary like that.

Her character had a tranquillity of spirit which he found soothing. Yet she was not always as gentle as a white dove. He saw her once or twice moved to quite a passionate anger, which took his breath away.

The first time was when one of the gardeners failed to do a piece of work which he had promised to get finished by a certain time. She questioned him, and he gave shifty answers, and then contradicted her bluntly.

Miss Garland was silent for a moment, and a vivid flush of colour swept into her face. Then she drew herself up very straight, and said in a quiet voice :

"Why do you lie to me ? "

"It's the truth," said the man doggedly, shifting from one foot to another.

She struck the ground with her stick sharply.

"Go out of my garden ! How dare you stand before me there and tell me falsehoods ? If I were not a frail woman you would not have the courage. Lying and laziness are sins I do not forgive. Please get your wages and go."

She raised her stick, and pointed to the garden gate.

The man, very red and sullen, looked up at her ; but there was so angry a light in her eyes that he quailed before it, and slouched slowly away. When he had disappeared behind a close-cropped hedge,

Miss Garland lowered her stick, and the colour fled from her face, leaving it very white.

"That man is a drunken, lazy, lying old fellow. I have had patience with him too long."

She saw Oliver's surprise, and seemed embarrassed, and said, "I do not often lose my temper like this. Forgive me. But I cannot tolerate lies and deceit. They make my blood boil. I have inherited that from my father. He nearly killed a man who had lied to him."

Oliver was disconcerted by this little scene. He had to revise his whole estimate of Miss Garland's character. This passion at a trivial fault was bewildering and alarming. There were times when he, like the grubby old gardener, was apt to prevaricate with truth.

He began to realise, too, that this gentle invalid lady was a strict disciplinarian in her house, and that all her servants were afraid of her. They loved her, he could see that, but they went in fear and trembling lest they should displease her.

He saw her write the word "Dust" on the rosewood piano before a neat housemaid who went quite white at the silent rebuke, and then burst into tears. He saw another maid tremble so that a silver tray laden with tea-cups was in danger of falling from her hands because Miss Garland said in a severe voice, "Mary, how often have I told you not to let me see you with a dirty pinafore? It is an insult to my guests, and disobedience to me."

It was such scenes as this that made Oliver use those words about her "inflexible spirit." Yet, like all women, she was complex and contradictory in character, for when the maid who had gone faint at the writing on the piano cut her finger one day, it was her mistress who bound it up with the greatest care; and when the other girl suffered from toothache, Miss Garland's sympathy was like that of an elder sister. She put her arm round the girl's waist and kissed her on the cheek.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THE BEGGAR MAN

THE days passed, and the weeks, and Oliver seemed to be drifting in a placid backwater of life, very lazy, very sunburnt, content to take tea on Virginia Garland's lawn with old ladies, to take long walks through Windlesham to quiet old woodland villages beyond, and to write in the evenings at a long novel, interrupted by quiet pipes over his fireside, or by playfulness with the girl Alice, whose prettiness and sauciness still kept him amused.

But in the first week of his second month in Windlesham a change came over him, as in the weather, which after the spell of sunshime was succeeded by rainy days, when the lane outside his cottage was a quagmire, and when for hours he heard the dripping of wet leaves and the patter of the rain-drops.

The charm suddenly went out of this country life. The cottage seemed a prison to him, cramping to body and soul. His spirits went down to zero.

One evening, working alone, he dropped his pen and groaned aloud. He had been writing the sorriest trash. Perhaps when it was finished it would not be published. What should he do then ?

In any case what should he do ? In spite of having paid no rent and of having lived largely on the bounty of Virginia Garland, he had spent all but one sovereign of the ten pounds he had brought from London. He was faced again with the direst poverty, and he flinched from it.

The confession of failure would be the worst to bear. How could he crawl back to London, to his old home in Denmark Hill, and say, " Father, I am penniless. Let me sit down at your table again until the luck turns ? " That would be impossible. He would rather starve.

For an hour he sat down before the small grate, in which a wood log was smouldering into white ash. He sat with his face in his hands, thinking deeply, so that a line was furrowed in his forehead. Then he gave a long quivering sigh, and rising, put on his overcoat and cap and went out into the rain. He walked up to The Rookery, and in a few minutes was taking off his things again in Virginia Garland's hall.

"Has Miss Garland finished supper?" he asked the maid, and she said that her mistress had finished an hour ago and was reading in the library.

"You know the way, sir?"

Oliver knew the way quite well, and going up the oak staircase he opened a door on the right of the first landing and went inside the great room, which the old General, Virginia's father, had lined with books from floor to ceiling.

The room, panelled in dark wood where there was space between the bookshelves, was dimly lighted, but a lamp with a red shade shed its rays upon Virginia Garland at the far end of the library. The two sheep-dogs were sleeping at her feet, breathing stertorously. She wore a white gown, cut low at the neck, and, sitting in a high-backed chair clasping its arms with a book in her lap, she seemed to Oliver like a mediæval princess in an old ghost-haunted room.

He stood in the shadow of the doorway for a minute, and she looked up and said:

"Yes. Who is it?"

"It is Oliver. May I interrupt your reading?"

"I was not reading—only thinking. But are you not working to-night?"

"I could not work. I have been thinking, too. I want to tell you about my thoughts."

He crossed over to her and sat in the chimney-corner, and clasped one knee with his hands.

"Not unpleasant thoughts? You look very serious to-night."

"Horribly unpleasant. You see, I have wakened up out of my dream."

She asked him what was the meaning of his words. What dream had he dreamed? She put the question

with a smile, as though amused by his romantic way of speech.

"It has all been a dream—this month or so. I came down from London expecting to stay a week-end. I did not know exactly why I came, except that something called to me. I was in difficulties. I had made a mess of things. I wanted to escape. Your letters seemed to tell me that here I should find sanctuary. So I came."

"Yes. I am glad you came," said Miss Garland. "But where are the dream and the awakening?"

"The dream came when I first saw you, and when you offered me your cottage. I have been living in a dream ever since. Those golden days in your garden, our walks together in the woods, the quiet hours in this old house, the utter peace of life here, and your friendship—it has been one long dream. I have said to myself a thousand times, 'You are dreaming, Oliver! You are dreaming! One day something will pinch you, and you will wake up.'"

"I don't quite understand," said Miss Garland. "Why should you think it all a dream? What do you mean by the awakening?"

"The awakening has come," said Oliver, with a tragic face. "It was my conscience that pinched me. To-night I woke up. To-morrow I go back to London."

"Oh, no! You must not do that!"

She leant forward, and put her hand on his sleeve.

"Stay a little longer, Oliver! You have your novel to finish. Surely you must get that done before you go!"

There was a note of pleading in her voice, and Oliver was thrilled by it. But he stared gloomily at the hearth-rug, and gave a slight groan.

"God knows I should like to stay. But every day makes it more difficult to go."

She said again in a troubled way:

"I do not understand! Why should you go?"

He looked up at her, and said:

"May I speak frankly?"

"Otherwise not at all," said Miss Garland, with one of the smiles that gave beauty to her face.

"Well, it is like this. I am a poor man. I am

desperately poor. But my pride has come back. I cannot go on being a pauper at your gates and accepting your charity. It isn't right. It isn't good for my peace of mind—or my peace of heart."

As he spoke the last words he looked up at her again, and their eyes met. She put out her hand, and turned the lamp-shade so that her face was no longer illuminated.

"Are you afraid of people talking? Do you mean that scandal-mongers——"

She paused, and drew a quick breath, as though the thought had angered her.

"No, not that. I believe there is gossip in the place, but that would not hurt you, or me."

He was silent for a little while, and then said rather passionately:

"Virginia, don't you understand? I am so poor that it is not safe for me to stay here. I cannot live on a woman's charity, and I dare not tell her what is in my heart, because I am a beggar-man at her garden-door, and not worthy to crawl on my knees before her."

"Tell me what is in your heart, Oliver," said Miss Garland, very softly.

"Fear," said Oliver. "I am afraid of the love there. Because I am poor and you are rich."

"Love? Did you say love, Oliver?"

Miss Garland spoke the words with a little timid cry, and a wave of colour swept into her face.

"I said love," replied Oliver, very gravely, in a low voice.

Miss Garland was on her knees now. She clasped his arms with her thin white hands.

"Oh, do not be afraid, Oliver! Tell me, do you mean that you love me? You will give me great riches if you tell me—that."

"I tell you that," he said.

"You love me?"

She asked the question as though the answer would be life or death to her.

"I love you," said Oliver. "That is my confession. That is why I must go away."

He looked very much ashamed of himself.

She laughed, a tremulous, joyful laugh, and clasped him close.

"Oh, my dear!" she said. "Oh, my dear! Is this true? I think it is I who am dreaming now."

"Perhaps it is a dream," said Oliver. "We have been walking in a garden of love, you and I. But I must go now."

He unclasped her arms and rose from his seat, and paced into the shadows of the room and back again into the lamp-light. His face was very white, and his eyes burned like coals. He stooped down and kissed the woman's hair, as she still knelt before his empty seat, with her hands clasped at her breast.

"Forget my stupid words. The princess does not stoop to the pauper. What would the world say? The beggar-man must slink away and hide his love in his rags."

But she would not let him go, not even to the end of the room. She reached up to his shoulders, and put her head against his heart.

"My dear, it is I who am the beggar. You are rich—in health, in youthfulness, in all the great gifts of life. I am poor in body and spirit. If you will give me your love, Oliver, I shall be lifted to a high throne."

That night as they sat together, hand clasped in hand, she told him how, since his first letters to her, she had always expected him. She had felt, in a strange, mystical way, that one day he would come. That afternoon when he had rung the bell at her door its jangling notes had startled her, and she thought, "That is Oliver Lumley." Then she stood face to face with him, and she was scared, because she knew that Oliver would take her heart, and perhaps would leave her, without it, in greater loneliness. Oh, she had been very lonely, till he came!

A score of times she questioned him whether he was sure he loved her. It seemed incredible. For he was young and she was old. Several times she cried out in distress:

"Oliver, I am ten years older than you! I should be wicked to let you marry me."

But he kissed her hand, and vowed that she had the heart of a child and would never grow old.

Then she told him that he loved an invalid—a poor, frail woman, lame in one leg, who would be a burden to him.

But he swore that he would devote his strength to her. She should lean upon his arm as they walked along the way together.

She wept a little with joy at that, and wondered why God and Oliver should be so kind to her.

Then Oliver poured out his heart, and made confession of some of his sins, and of his failure and of some of his debts.

"My dear," she said, when she had heard all that he told her, "we must pay your debts quickly. I will not have my husband tortured by any whisper of conscience, nor under any faint shadow of dishonour. My poor boy, how you must have suffered!"

She rejoiced that she could wipe all that out with one stroke of her pen. In future he would not be troubled by such squalid cares. He would be free now to write according to his highest ideals and not pander to the popular market.

"You will write great books and noble books, Oliver."

Yet she reproached him, gently and tenderly.

"You have been weak, Oliver. I wish you had faced poverty with a more masterful spirit. See, I tell you the truth, even in these first hours of our love. You will not be angry with me because I tell you the truth?"

"I ask for nothing but your love and truthfulness," said Oliver. "I know I have been as weak as water. But you will teach me to be strong."

She said, "Promise me one thing. Let us be married quickly. I cannot wait for my happiness. You see, I have been lonely so long."

"I promise," said Oliver. "We will be married quickly, my dear."

When he walked to his cottage that night he seemed to be in a dream again. "Thank the stars," he said, as he put his hand upon the garden gate. "The Luck has turned at last."

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THE WONDERFUL NEWS

OLIVER paid a visit to London before his marriage and enjoyed himself.

He walked the streets not as a hang-dog fellow, afraid to meet a creditor at every corner, but as a man who, after poverty, has come into a fair heritage, so that he may hold his head high and look all men straight in the eyes.

He had left London as a failure. He came back as a success, trailing clouds of glory about him. Even his physical appearance was altered. He was richly bronzed. His lungs had been filled for several months with country air, so that his chest was filled out and his shoulders were squared. He walked with a long, swinging stride. He had no longer the tired eyes and drawn look of a man who keeps late hours. His eyes were bright and keen. His face had put on flesh. One could not meet a handsomer fellow on a long day's march. He had such a noble, smiling look, that when he walked down Piccadilly or the Strand people turned to glance at him and went on their way refreshed by the mere sight of a young man so rich in health and holding his head so high in a troubled world.

Miss Garland had paved the way for his triumphant entry to London. She had opened an account in his name in one of the Windlesham banks, and said, "My dear, let me know that you have paid all your debts and put yourself right in the world. You will want clothes, too, for our marriage day, and pocket-money for your visits to town. . . . No, you must not be proud, Oliver. Are you not giving me all yourself ? "

That had made things easy for him. It had given him golden opportunities for fulfilling his most generous instincts. Rescued from miserable poverty, with its degradation, his soul seemed to expand and grow, like a

plant taken from the cellar into the sunlight. He was filled with benevolence to all humanity.

His first cheque was for fifty pounds, made out to Lady Katherine Goldstein. He signed his name with a flourish, and enclosed the slip of pink paper with a note :

*With warmest thanks, from Oliver Lumley.*

Two days later he received the acknowledgment. It was the first time he had seen Katherine's handwriting since that unfortunate misunderstanding.

*Dear Roly,*

*Many thanks for the cheque. I am so glad to think that you are prospering.*

*Yours sincerely,*
*Katherine Goldstein.*

*P.S.—I have forgiven you for something that made me very angry. After all, life is too short for stupid quarrels. I remember our friendship.*

He kept that letter in his breast pocket, though when he first read it the sight of the finely-pointed handwriting had brought back remembrances which were too emotional. Staring at the paper, Katherine's face, her smile, the fragrance of her hair, the faint echo of her laughter, her piquant beauty came hauntingly back to him. He sighed like a man who has stirred the dying embers of an old passion, and feels a flame leap up to his heart again.

" A queer game—this life," he said ; and with that comment folded up Katherine's letter and put it in his pocket.

He wrote other cheques with delightful ease, astonished at the rapidity with which a man with a banking account may wipe out debts so grim and menacing in his days of destitution. Thirty pounds to his tailor—it took but half a minute to write. Five pounds, ten pounds, three pounds, a guinea : as fast as he could remember the names of his tradesmen and of club friends whom he had " touched " for this small loan and that the leaves fell

from his cheque book, and made a pretty pattern on the tablecloth of his sitting-room in Myrtle Cottage.

"This is all right for Oliver!" said that young man, laughing irresistibly, and in the greatest good-humour at the swift and superb manner in which he settled his accounts with past history. When he had thrust all his letters into the red mouth of a letter-box in Miss Garland's garden-wall he had the feeling of a man who has released himself from a pack of care, and springs up untrammelled to go singing on his way to the banquet of life.

On his way to the banquet he went to Denmark Hill, where his family was supping on cold mutton and bread-and-butter pudding. One line only had he sent them in advance, but it seemed to contain a miracle:

*I have the best of news. I am a rich man, and I shall be with you soon.*

The hand of the clock seemed to have been put back when the taxicab in which he drove up to them paused outside the small villa, and when Mrs. Lumley, who had been the first to hear it, opened the front door and called out into the darkness, "Is that you, Oliver?" He sprang up the steps to her with a laugh.

"Here is the prodigal son. Back again!"

In the narrow hall she folded him in her arms and said, "My dearest boy! Oliver, my dearest! You nearly broke my heart by your silence."

He kissed her pale face on both cheeks, and said, "It is all right, mother. I am going to give you all a good time. I am going to pay back some of my debts."

His father stood in the doorway of the dining-room, holding a book in one hand, and his spectacle-case in the other. He seemed strangely ill at ease at this sudden return of his son, and clearing his voice with a little cough said:

'So you have come back, Oliver. What is the meaning of your mysterious letter? How have you become rich?"

He spoke as if he were very much afraid that his son had not obtained his wealth by honest means. Oliver seized him by the hand, and put it to his lips.

"Dad!" he said. "Don't be scared. I haven't been robbing any one. Where's old Horace? Where's Gallypot?"

Horace and Galatea were both in the sitting-room. They stood up at the supper-table, holding their napkins and listening to the words spoken in the hall. It seemed as if they, too, believed that Oliver had been guilty of some crime in becoming rich, or as if they were in the presence of a miracle and were frightened.

"Oliver," said Galatea, "are you serious? What has happened to you?"

"Tell us the news," said Horace. "You are like a man who has come back again from the dead."

Oliver was rather taken aback by their coldness and incredulity.

"Well, you don't seem pleased to hear about my good luck. This is not a cheerful home-coming; hang me if it is."

"You are looking awfully brown, old boy!" said Horace, putting some brotherly warmth into his voice. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"We should be glad to hear about your good luck," said Mr. Lumley. "Luck has been a stranger to this house for some time. I may say I have never known what luck was."

He rubbed his spectacles with his handkerchief, and spoke the words rather wistfully.

"Roly, darling, do not keep us in suspense!" said Mrs. Lumley.

Oliver's good humour returned to him. He could see now that the coldness of his family was only apparent, and covered a consuming desire to know his news, and a sense of mystery which had led to strange anxieties and secret hopes. But he teased them a little longer, and asked them to guess in what way Luck had come to him. Galatea said that he must have written a play and had it accepted by Beerbohm Tree. Horace thought that he must have sold a serial story to the *Daily Mail*. Mr. Lumley put his guess into the form of a suspicion, and hoped that Oliver had not been gambling on the Stock Exchange. He was of opinion that money obtained quickly in this way fled just as fast.

Then Oliver laughed very quietly, and said :

" It is better than all that. I am going to marry a rich woman. I am going to become a man of property."

A dead silence fell upon the family. The news seemed to have struck them dumb.

Mrs. Lumley was the first to speak.

" A rich woman ? . . . Is she a good woman, Oliver ? "

" More than good. A saint, mother."

" I say, old boy," said Horace, " this is rather sudden, isn't it ? You have only been away six weeks."

" It has been a romance," said Oliver. " An idyll. I could not explain it to you- - "

" Is she pretty ? " asked Galatea.

" She is a dream-woman," said Oliver.

Mr. Lumley shifted uneasily in his chair.

" Dream-women are sometimes rather dangerous. . . . In any case, a wife with money puts a man in a false position. . . . I hope she is not an adventuress."

Oliver suddenly became violently angry.

" Of all the extraordinary people," he said, " my own family beats creation. Anybody would think I had been robbing hen-roosts or leading a life of vice. Here I come back full of desire to lift you out of this shabby gentility, to make you relations by marriage of an old county family, to let you share my good fortune, and you make remarks that are deliberately insulting to myself and my future wife."

His violence shocked them. Mrs. Lumley cried a little. Mr. Lumley said that he did not mean to say anything unkind. Horace came and gripped him by the hand, and said, " Congratulations, old boy," in a sepulchral voice, and Galatea said that no one could be more glad that he had found happiness. So they coaxed him back to good-temper, and that evening, after the cold mutton and the bread-and-butter pudding, he told them of his life at Windlesham, and of Myrtle Cottage, and of Virginia Garland.

Of Virginia he drew a beautiful portrait, and his voice thrilled when he spoke of his reverence for her and of her gracious, bountiful character. Then he described The Rookery, and unconsciously, exaggerated its grandeur

and the immensity of its garden, so that it might have been a ducal mansion in a noble park.

"All that will be mine," he said. "Virginia and I will share everything in common."

He forgot, he honestly forgot, that he was bringing nothing to her but the sheets of an unpublished story.

"My dear," said Mrs. Lumley, "it is all wonderful. But you will be too grand for us."

"Virginia has a beautiful simplicity. She will love you, mother. She would not despise even this little home. But I hope we shall be able to make you an allowance, so that you may move into a bigger house, in a better neighbourhood—Sydenham, for example. It sounds so much better than Denmark Hill."

"We shall be your poor relations," said Galatea, with just a trace of bitterness. "I shall be frightfully afraid of Miss Garland, Roly."

"She will be Mrs. Oliver Lumley when you know her!"

Oliver smiled at his sister in the happiest frame of mind now, and with an imagination excited by his generous visions.

That night he heard some news which made him very sorry for poor "Gallypot" as he called his sister. It seemed that while he had been away she also had been living in a romance. Charles Hardy had been very kind to her, and she had been to ever so many theatres with him, and he had made a habit of spending his evenings, when not otherwise engaged, at the little house in Denmark Hill. Then one night, when he was taking Galatea home in a hansom cab he asked her to be his wife. Of course that made her the happiest girl on earth, for she had loved Hardy at first sight. There was no difficulty at home, and the news of their daughter's engagement had been a real joy to Mr. and Mrs. Lumley.

Then, a week ago, a thunderbolt had fallen which had shattered Galatea's house of dreams. She and Charles Hardy had already made their plans for the future, and had arranged to live in a beautiful flat in High Street, Kensington. Hardy had already bought a gate-post table as the first instalment of his household furniture, and had his eye on a suite of dining-room chairs.

But one night he came to the Lumley's house very pale

and agitated, and they knew at once that he had bad news to tell them.

It was very bad indeed. The newspaper on which Charles Hardy had been earning a handsome salary had changed hands. There was a new proprietor, and he lost no time in dismissing members of the old staff in order to bring in his own men. It is a well-known game in Fleet Street, and has brought many good journalists to misery. Hardy was one of the first to come under the guillotine.

"Your salary is too high," said the new editor of the new proprietor. "If you like to take half I will keep you on."

"I would rather starve!" said Hardy.

"Please yourself," said the new editor, very calmly.

So from twelve pounds a week Hardy was brought down swiftly to Nothing a week, which is not enough for a young man who has just become engaged to get married.

After the first shock he had faced the situation with pluck and a sense of humour. He kissed Galatea's tears away (though he could not cure her red eyes), and hustled round the other newspaper offices. But they were "full up." All they could promise was "to bear him in mind"—a vague and hopeless pledge. Now Hardy was spending his days in the club, waiting for something to turn up, writing London letter notes for the provincial papers, and cursing all newspaper proprietors with ingenious and carefully-chosen epithets. Even his sense of humour was wearing rather thin.

Oliver was distressed at this domestic misfortune.

"I am sorry you ever got engaged to the fellow," he said to Galatea. "Journalism is always a precarious job, and in any case Hardy was not a brilliant match for you. I give you fair warning, Galatea, I shan't tolerate a long engagement. If he does not get a good place again pretty soon, you must break with him. I can't have my pretty sister losing all her chances in life out of mistaken fidelity to an impecunious pressman. When you come down to Windlesham there are plenty of county men who would be glad to fall in love with you."

Galatea was flamingly indignant with him. She would be true to Hardy till death, she said, and then burst into tears.

Oliver patted her hand.

"That is all right. I admire you for saying that. But after a time the romance will wear off."

On the following night he met Hardy himself at the club and was very sympathetic to him, seeing how dejected e was. But he gave him a few words of warning.

"Look here, my lad, I can't have my sister's heart broken by a hopeless engagement. You understand that, don't you?"

Hardy eyed him very coolly.

"Don't go putting on damned supercilious airs with me, Roly. I am not a sponger on women."

He had his hands in the pockets of a Norfolk jacket, and looked down at Oliver from his six-foot height with a deliberately contemptuous stare.

"Do you mean that as an insinuation?" asked Oliver, with a sudden flame of anger on his face.

"Just as you like to take it," said Hardy.

Then suddenly his mood changed, and he swung round and grasped Oliver's arm.

"Look here, don't let's quarrel. I hope to be your brother-in-law one of these days, old man. But I am feeling very sick with myself just now, and I've got a bitter taste in my mouth."

Oliver accepted his apology with some dignity and reserve, but Hardy's words rankled. He would never quite forget them, nor forgive them.

Yet he thrust them out of his mind as often as possible that night at the club, when he stood innumerable drinks to friends who made a hero of him because he was so mysteriously "flush" of money and so splendidly bronze and so quick to laugh at their jests. It was a bachelor's night for Oliver, before his marriage. After the silence of the country, and the society of old ladies, and the quiet hours with Virginia Garland, all this noise and rowdiness of free-spoken men was invigorating. When he left the club in the early hours of the morning and went out into the streets on his way to an hotel in the Strand, the spirit of London called to him, the throb of it set his pulse beating to an old tune. For a little while he wandered about the lamplighted streets, watching the taxicabs flashing past with swift glimpses of men and women in

evening dress, going home after late adventures in the world of pleasure. He stood on a "save-me-life" in the centre of the golden glamour of Piccadilly Circus. He was thinking of a grey old house in the depths of the country, of a dark lane ankle-deep in mud, of the hushed fields under their cloak of darkness, and of the owls hooting plaintively round a thatched cottage. He shivered a little at the thought of that country solitude. For a young man with an active brain and a restless heart it would be like premature burial.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### A WARNING

BEFORE going back to Windlesham Oliver met Lady Katherine. It was in the very middle of Piccadilly Circus, where he had stood on the "save-me-life." She was in her own car, which had drawn up in a block of traffic. She saw him first as he was crossing the road and he heard her voice calling him.

"Roly! . . . Mr. Lumley."

At the sound of that voice he turned sharply, and was nearly caught in the tide of traffic, which was released by the hand of the policeman "on point."

"Jump in," said Katherine Goldstein, and then when he had obeyed, she said, "You have just escaped sudden death, you know. That cab shaved you by half an inch."

It had happened so suddenly that Oliver could hardly believe that he was actually sitting by the side of this lady, driving towards Bond Street. It surprised him as much as if he had suddenly found himself on a magic carpet in Bagdad. He hadn't the least idea what to say to her, and murmured something about the weather, but she immediately began asking questions, one after the other, so that he had time to think.

"Where have you been all this time? What was the name of the place you wrote from? Windlesham? Where's Windlesham? Have you had luck with your writing? I should be glad to know that."

He said simply and suddenly:

"I am going to be married."

He had an idea that this would startle the pretty lady, that it would be a revenge upon her cruelty, that she would be sorry to know that he had healed his heart so quickly after the wounds she had given him.

But Katherine Goldstein was delighted, it seemed.

"How splendid!" she said, and clapped her hands together. "It will do you all the good in the world. Now you *will* have to work. I am so very, very glad, Oliver. You wanted a spur, because you *were* lazy, you know."

"My future wife is a rich woman," said Oliver drily.

"A rich woman!"

Katherine was really startled now, and the sparkle went out of her eyes.

"Roly! How dangerous! How fatal!"

It was his turn to get startled. She spoke the words so tragically that they alarmed him.

"Dangerous? Fatal? How's that?"

"My dear boy," she said, "for Heaven's sake stop my car and let us get out and have tea somewhere. Then I can talk to you seriously, instead of going to those appalling Bernsteins. I want to save you if I may."

Oliver stopped the car at a tea-shop at the top of New Bond Street, and when they sat at a quiet tea-table in the corner, Katherine put her elbows on the table and faced him squarely and said, "I am going to talk to you like a grandmother."

"Quite impossible," said Oliver; "you look like my younger sister."

He thought she looked extraordinarily pretty. She was wearing a white muslin dress and a big black hat with a silver cord round the crown.

"I am old in wisdom, and you, Oliver, are quite one of the most foolish young men it is my privilege to know." She paused, and said thoughtfully, "And I know some!"

"Thanks!" said Oliver.

"Not at all. I speak the truth."

She picked pieces of sugar out of a silver basin with a little pair of tongs and dropped them back again.

"Oliver, for the sake of our friendship"—she blushed a little here—"and some very pleasant memories—unhappily interrupted——"

"Most unhappily," said Oliver.

"Most unhappily," said Katherine. "I must warn you against marrying a rich wife."

"I shall be glad to know your reasons."

"I will tell you. They may be put briefly. Do you not know that when a penniless man marries a rich woman he becomes her slave? Don't you know that one day she will turn round and reproach him and say, 'You are spending my money. I am keeping you. I am the absolute mistress of this house. You must ask me for every sixpence you want to pay for tobacco, or a shave.' Roly, think of that! You will lose your manhood and your spirit of independence. You will never be master of your wife, and unless you are master you will be utterly miserable and crushed."

"Where do you get all this knowledge, dear lady?" asked Oliver, very calmly.

"Here, and here," said Katherine; and she put her hand to her left side.

"Do I understand you to mean your heart?" said Oliver.

"Oh, you may jeer. But I have a heart."

She was silent for a moment, and then said very seriously, "It is bad enough for a poor woman to marry a rich man. There are times when she revolts against her position of absolute dependence. Oh, there are times when she would give much to have a little money of her very own, not to be a beggar in fine clothing, and to be able to spend a few guineas of her own, on private interests of her own, without rendering an account to her man. It is rather sickening always to be a pampered slave. But for a man it is humiliating. It is intolerable."

Oliver was more disturbed than he cared to show. But he answered lightly:

"Virginia will never humiliate me."

"Virginia? Is that her name? It is pretty."

"Virginia Garland," said Oliver.

"It is a countrified name," said Katherine. "It sounds very sweet."

She asked questions about his future wife, but he did not answer in much detail. In that tea-shop, sitting opposite Katherine Goldstein, Oliver began to feel rather depressed and restless. There stirred in him some of that old emotion which had been awakened when on adventures with Katherine, they had been alone

together like this. Her charm, her brightness, her interest in him, opened old wounds.

He heard some of her words like a man in a dream.

"I hope you will be very happy, Oliver. Forgive me for having been too candid. . . . My warning, anyhow, was impudent."

She had to go now; and he picked up her big black muff and stroked it a moment.

"Devilish funny thing, life," he said. "It's all a silly gamble, don't you think? One has to muddle on, taking the risks."

"It's all right if you play the game," said Katherine.

That was a favourite phrase of hers; and when she was in her big car, and the footman put a rug round her before springing up by the side of the chauffeur, she gave her hand to Oliver and smiled at him, and said, "Play the game, Roly!" Then she bent her head towards him so that her hair touched his forehead as he stood with one foot on the step.

"I have forgotten our foolish quarrel, and Rudolf has forgiven. Tell the man to drive to Portland Place. Good luck!"

Oliver told the man, and lifted his hat as the car slipped off silently into the stream of traffic. He walked slowly away, wondering, very thoughtfully, at a jig-saw puzzle of hearts.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### HUSBAND AND WIFE

Oliver Lumley and Virginia Garland were married, very quietly, at St. Ursula's, Windlesham. Very quietly as regards ceremony and the number of invited guests, but not without public interest.

There was a crowd of Windlesham people outside the church doors, who raised a cheer when the bride was helped down from her carriage by the bridegroom, and, leaning upon his arm, smiled upon them rather shyly.

Miss Garland wore, according to *The Windlesham Gazette*, "a going-away dress of dove-grey cashmere, trimmed with silk braid, and a superb bouquet of Malmaison carnations."

The bridegroom, also according to *The Windlesham Gazette*, "was immaculately attired in a grey frock-suit and a glossy silk hat, which harmonised in a remarkable way with the subdued and delicate costume of the lady —so well known for her generosity and benevolence in this ancient market town, of which his worship the mayor is so distinguished an ornament."

Among the other sightseers at the church door, some of whom afterwards sat in the back pews, was Alice Featherfew, to whom Oliver had told fairy stories and other *contes drolatiques* in between her sweeping and dusting and cooking in Myrtle Cottage. Her face was smudged with the trace of tears, and she looked unhappy.

Oliver went into the quietude of the church with Virginia Garland on his arm, and passed up the nave to the altar rails, where they knelt.

All Virginia's old ladies were in the church. The Dowager Countess of Buntingford had a new bonnet of lilac silk above her white hair. Miss Purchase had a black bonnet with little sequins, which shook as though she were trembling with emotion or shaking with mirth.

The Honourable Mrs. Perceval was a brilliant figure at the top of the church in a sky-blue dress. She turned as Oliver and Virginia passed on their way, and Oliver caught the smile in her eyes. As he knelt at the altar he wondered what that smile meant. She seemed to be frankly amused at their marriage. Other ladies from the country-houses in and around Windlesham were in the church, and several middle-aged and elderly gentlemen, who were their husbands or fathers—retired officers, country squires, doctors, and solicitors. Oliver was pleased at this assembly. He would be in the best society in Worcestershire. These people all belonged to "The Quality."

Virginia's choir were singing now to the woman who had trained their voices. Their anthem rose softly above the organ note. Oliver wondered why the girl Alice was not in her place. He thought of all kinds of things as he knelt down beside the woman who in a few minutes would be his wife. He thought of a funny scene which had taken place when he was a boy. He had been playing truant from school, and was just on his way to a swimming bath, when he came face to face with his form-master, who was supposed to be ill in bed with influenza. What was his name? Higson, Smithson, Gibson? For a moment or two Oliver was troubled because he could not remember the name of his old schoolmaster. Then he was bothered about Miss Purchase's bonnet. What a ridiculous bonnet it was! With all those sequins shaking! . . . What had Katherine said? Dangerous and fatal? How pretty she had looked in her big black hat! She had perfect taste. And she was very kind! She had always been very kind to him. . . . As kind as Livvy, only in a different way. Poor little Livvy! As good-hearted as she was high, and had a rough life too. It was amusing when old Horace dropped in. What was that song Doris had sung? How did the absurd words go?

Horace was a curate,
Horace was so shy . . .

He could not remember the rest. What rhymes with curate? There didn't seem a word in the whole language to rhyme with curate.

He was sorry that no members of his family were here. His mother was ill with influenza, and Galatea was nursing her, and neither his father nor Horace had been able to leave their offices.

The clergyman came down to the altar rails, and Oliver's wandering thoughts came back to the place and time. He was about to be married. Virginia was kneeling by his side. He stole a glance at her. Her face was upturned. The light streaming through a lancet window fell upon it, giving it a glow of colour. It was a spiritual face, and so tender and meek.

Oliver's heart gave a great beat. Oh, he would love her. He would be good to her. His lips moved in inarticulate prayer. He prayed that he might be worthy of this dear lady, that he might be stronger, that he might play the game. It was not a bad prayer for Oliver Lumley.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN

THERE was a small reception afterwards in The Rookery, and quaint old broughams and pony-chaises, and one or two smart dog-carts crowded the drive.

Virginia—she was Virginia Lumley now—sat to receive her guests, because she was tired, and Oliver stood by her chair. Several times she turned her head to look up at him with a glance of beautiful love.

Lady Buntingford was quite right when she said, "My squirrel, you look very happy to-day. You look uncommonly proud of that handsome boy of yours. I am afraid you will spoil him mightily."

She shook her old head at Oliver.

"I thought there was mischief in those black eyes when I first saw them in the garden."

She kissed Virginia on her forehead.

"Prince Charming came to wake the Sleeping Beauty."

She took one of Oliver's hands and patted it.

"I think you will be kind to our dear Virginia. I think we can trust you to take care of her."

Then she bent forward and whispered to him:

"Of course I am frightfully jealous. You jilted me shamefully."

She gave a silvery laugh, and said, "I am always happy at a wedding. It warms my sentimental old heart."

The old lady had given a handsome present to Virginia. It was a necklace of pearls which had once been worn round the white throat of Queen Elizabeth, who had left it behind at Buntingford House as a gift for the beautiful Margaret Buntingford, who had been one of her maids of honour. Virginia wore the pearls now, and the old lady touched them and said, "May you have as many blessings, my dove, as there are pearls in this

rope, and as many years of happiness. I've counted 'em. Seventy-two."

"By that time our dear Virginia will be a great-grandmother," said Miss Purchase with a shrill little laugh. "At least I hope so," she added, with a look which brought a blush to the cheek of Mrs. Oliver Lumley.

"Of course the children did not deceive my sharp eyes," continued Miss Purchase. "When I saw them sitting in the woods together one day I said to myself, 'There will be a wedding in Windlesham, or I'm a Dutchman.'"

"You prying old lady!" cried Mrs. Perceval gaily. (She had not been invited to the reception, but came as "one of Miss Garlands' fondest friends.") "Now when *I* heard of Mr. Lumley living in Myrtle Cottage, so close to The Rookery wall, and knew that he came so often to Virginia's house and garden, I suspected nothing. It never occurred to me for a moment that Romance had come to Windlesham! Of course little whispers were going about——"

"Ah!" said Miss Purchase grimly, "I heard them. All the whispers come to my ears pretty quick, I can tell you. There is nothing goes on in or about Windlesham without *my* knowledge, Mrs. Perceval."

The sequins in her black bonnet shook in an agitated manner, and she looked at Mrs. Perceval as though she knew a good deal about that lady herself.

But Mrs. Perceval laughed in the greatest good-humour.

"If we have anything to conceal we must all hide from *you*, dear Miss Purchase."

She turned to Oliver and said, "You will have to be very careful, Mr. Lumley. You have no idea how many vigilant eyes are upon our lives and characters. It is most dangerous, I assure you."

"I hope I may not have anything to hide," said Oliver. "That is the best policy, isn't it?"

He spoke rather priggishly, but he had resented a trace of insinuation in Mrs. Perceval's speech.

He was glad when the guests had gone and when he sat alone with his wife.

"Oh, my dear husband!" she said then. "How can I thank God for this happiness?"

She slipped down upon her knees and put her arms

about him, as on the night when she had confessed her heart to him.

"I can hardly believe that I am your wife really and truly. You are so young, such a boy, darling, and I am so much older. Do you know, I feel a little afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Afraid that you will get tired of me, and of the quiet life here."

She put her hand up to his head and drew it down a little.

"Have you no fear of that, Oliver? Do you think you will always love me?"

"You are my dear wife," said Oliver. "I pray that I may be worthy of you."

They did not start upon their honeymoon until the next day. On that wedding-night Oliver sat alone for a little while in the dining-room. The candles made pools of light upon the oak table and glinted on the silver and glass. It was a large, old-fashioned room, panelled in dark wood. The portraits of some of Virginia Garland's ancestors, old Generals in the Peninsular War, ladies of the Georgian period, with white sloping shoulders and oval eyes, looked down upon him. He sat at the head of the table in a big chair with the crest of the Garlands—a boar's head—carved on the back of it.

He was a country gentleman now, and the master of this house. As he smoked a cigar he saw scenes out of his old life through curling smoke-wreaths—the sitting-room in Rosemary Avenue, with its threadbare furniture; his room in Barton Street, Westminster, himself shabby, with frayed trouser-ends, borrowing half-crowns from Horace. He had got away from that poverty-stricken life. He looked round the big dining-room, and gave a deep sigh of satisfaction, and spoke a word or two aloud.

"Well done, Oliver!" he said, as though he had made a good catch in the cricket field.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### THE UNVEILED SOUL

It was October when Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Lumley came back to the Rookery from a tour in Italy, and the Worcestershire woodlands were in all their glory of gold and russet. In Virginia's garden leaves were falling after the first night-frost, but her gardener swept and swept, so that when his mistress came home the green carpet of the lawn and the gravel paths showed no trace of autumn's decay. Sunshine lay upon the grey old walls of the house and glinted on the window-panes with their white sashes. Behind in the high beech trees the rooks were cawing a drowsy welcome.

Virginia was glad to be home again. She was tired after travelling. She had exerted more strength than she could spare, so that Oliver should see as much as possible. They had gone together to many picture-galleries, to many old churches and classical antiquities, and there had been times when she could have almost fallen from fatigue, and when her lameness became more painful. But she hid this weariness from Oliver, and tried to keep pace with his energy.

Only once or twice, when she leaned heavily on his arm and was more than usually pale, did he notice that anything was amiss with her. But she had scared him in Florence when she was ill for a week, owing to the great heat and her over-exertion. She lay in a little white bed in a room with gauze window-curtains and green shutters, which did not keep out the sun-baked air, which seemed to put warm fingers about her throat to stifle her. She would not let Oliver sit long by her bedside, holding her hand, but sent him out to enjoy himself.

"You must see everything," she said. "It will be so good for your work. You must store your mind with new impressions."

So he went out alone and explored the beauties of Florence, and at night, when Virginia, as he believed, would be asleep (though really she lay awake waiting for him), he visited theatres or sat outside cafés watching the Florentine women and the foreign visitors, while the music of stringed orchestras throbbed into the stillness of an Italian night, with its translucent darkness and pale-blue sky, in which stars shone like jewels. Oliver amused himself but sometimes felt too lonely. At the tables outside the cafés were gay people, laughing, whispering, making love together. Beautiful women with lazy, lustrous eyes smoked cigarettes or fluttered fans around him. Good-looking Englishmen or smart little Italians were having a good time with them.

There were adventures to be had in Florence without much seeking. Romance lurks in its half-lights and in its shadows. Oliver would have been glad now and then to follow the trail of an adventure. The laughter of the women thrilled him. He was young and this was Italy, and all around him was the sense of amorous opportunities. But when he went back rather late at night to Virginia and found her still awake—how white her face looked and how wistful her eyes!—he was glad that he had remembered his wife.

"How sweet the old home looks!" said Virginia when they were back again at The Rookery. "Do you know, Oliver, I think I shall never go abroad again. It is far too tiring, and the heat and the dust are almost unbearable."

"Never is a long time," said Oliver, laughing at her. "Having tasted foreign travel, I want more of it. But I agree that the old Rookery tempts one to be a stay-at-home."

"Now we must settle down to work," said Virginia. "It is a long time since you have done any writing, dear heart."

"Writing!" said Oliver. "Oh, Lord!"

He groaned at the thought of it.

"I think I shall never get into the mood again. To sit down to those foolish stories once more—that sentimental trash!"

"But you are going to write your big book now," said Virginia. "You have not forgotten that?"

He smiled.

"I had almost forgotten."

Then seeing the look of anxiety in her eyes, he said, "I am going to have a try, anyhow."

But it was some time before he began to have a try. As he explained to his wife, it was difficult to settle down into the collar after such a change in his life, and those Italian wanderings. Besides, he wanted the first months of their married life at home to be unspoiled by the necessity for torturing his brain for a plot. (He had abandoned that half-finished story at which he had worked in Myrtle Cottage.) He wanted to enjoy her love, to soak himself in the spirit of the old house and garden, to explore the country around, and to get himself accustomed to the life of a country gentleman before sitting down doggedly to hard work. When he once started he would work like the very dickens.

"That is right," said Virginia. "I want you to work hard. I want you to write something worthy of you, something good and noble, to help the world on."

Oliver laughed and kissed his wife's hand.

"My dear, you hope great things of me. It will be difficult for me to rise to the height of your ideals. They are tremendously exalted."

"Aim high, Oliver. Always aim high."

Oliver was beginning to know his wife pretty well. It took some time, for no one may pretend to know the character of a woman on the first day of marriage. Then he knows her only according to a portrait painted in his imagination, idealised, and coloured by his own desires and expectations. As the days pass the real woman appears, the little secrets of her heart are revealed, the fine shades of her temperament, the convictions which are an essential part of her character, not to be changed by argument nor circumstances, her prejudices, superstitions, and faith. Danger signals appear, teaching a man to be careful of blundering that way. He begins to know the limitations of her character, and how far he may go before he reaches the boundary of her toleration or of her imagination. By accident of experiment he touches some of her nerves and sets them quivering. In the thousand-and-one incidents of daily life he sees the

woman's spirit unveiled. And sometimes he is startled, or shocked, or made afraid.

Oliver knew now that Virginia Garland had other qualities besides gentleness and charity. Only those would have been rather cloying and sickly. In spite of her ill-health (and she was never strong), she had a practical and active mind, and a spirit of orderliness which was sometimes rather troublesome to him. Tidiness was almost a passion with her. She could not bear to see a thing out of its place or a room disarranged. They had little quarrels about that, or rather she rebuked him, and he laughed at her for her primness—because he was never tidy, and could hardly go into a room without leaving it somewhat littered with his newspapers and letters, and match-boxes and cigarettes. If he took a book down from a shelf he was sure to leave it lying face downwards on a sofa or table. When he came in from a walk he would fling his cap on to the nearest chair.

"I see that I shall have to train you," said Virginia more than once, laughing, not without vexation. "You have been shockingly brought up."

He promised to mend his ways, but a certain slovenliness was in his nature, and he could not conform to this "old-maidishness," as he called it, chaffingly, to his wife.

Nor was he very amenable to the ordered discipline of her household. Virginia was an early riser and sat down to the breakfast-table at eight o'clock. Oliver, who had been a lie-a-bed in London—so that often he heard Big Ben booming eleven times before he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes—found an eight o'clock breakfast a Spartan ordeal. Often he sat up late reading by the fireside long after Virginia had gone to rest, and he was full of yawns and weariness when the maid tapped at the door next morning at a quarter past seven. Time after time he came down late to breakfast, to encounter Virginia's reproachful eyes. Once she spoke quite sharply to him.

"Oliver, I must insist upon your being punctual at meals. The servants are becoming demoralised."

"The servants must adapt themselves to my little ways, dearest," said Oliver, cutting off the top of an egg very neatly.

"Isn't that rather selfish?" asked Virginia. "For

my sake, then, I ask you to come down in time. You see the tea is cold."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Oliver. "Forgive me, dearest."

She forgave him easily enough when he expressed his contrition, forgave him laughingly, and said that she would never be able to teach him method and order. Yet she taught him enough to make him afraid of offending wantonly, and to make him conceal small faults of forgetfulness or thoughtlessness which he knew would hurt her. Once she found him stooping down to brush away with his handkerchief some cigarette-ash which he had let fall on to the drawing-room carpet. He blushed crimson at being discovered in this act of humility.

Frail as she was, Virginia had a strong will underneath her gentle and quiet ways. We have seen how her servants were afraid of displeasing her. Oliver himself became conscious of his wife's will, compelling him, with a silent and mysterious force, putting a sense of discipline upon him. Not by a hairbreadth did she alter the routine of the household to suit his more erratic habits. Never once did she moderate a single principle or ideal, although in their fireside conversations he chaffed her sometimes as being old-fashioned or "a pretty Puritan," or austere to the verge of intolerance. He became aware, in a semi-conscious way, that there was solid rock of principle in Virginia's character against which he would break himself if he were to come up against it. From her father—a sturdy old general who had served most of his time in India—she had inherited certain maxims which had become woven into the texture of her nature.

"'Tell the truth always, though it cuts like a sharp knife. Never tolerate a liar, though he be your best friend.'

"'Be brave. Courage is a part of truth. To bear pain silently, to lose all that one loves best without a whimper, to face death without flinching, and life with a smile, is the supreme test of a brave man or woman.'

"'Never be weak for the sake of being amiable. Never forgive a sin which is not atoned. Punishment must go before forgiveness.'

"'Do not surrender God to the enemy for the sake of peace.'"

Virginia remembered those words of her father, and repeated them to Oliver as part of her childhood's creed.

"They are hard words," said Oliver. "A man who acted on them always would be as cruel as the devil."

"My father was not cruel," said Virginia. "He was the kindest-hearted man, and devoted to animals and children."

"Yes, but thwart him," said Oliver, "and he would show a heart of steel."

"True as steel and strong as steel. Those are good qualities, Oliver."

"I would rather have a weaker man with more pity and more tolerance for frailty. Even lying is not so black a sin. Sometimes it is caused by sheer weakness, and sometimes by the desire to please."

Virginia was shocked by those words.

"Dear heart," she said, "all evil has its roots in lying and deceit."

In such conversations as that Oliver learned to know his wife, and always, though they did not agree on many problems of life, her words left him with a new sense of reverence for a spirit higher and stronger than his own.

Yet he could not quite understand her dual nature of strength and gentleness, of pride and humility, of courage and nervousness. Those complexities in her character were continually surprising him. He knew, for instance, that she dominated him by her will-power, and that he could not influence nor alter her character of convictions by any argument or moral pressure. Yet he knew also that she loved him with extraordinary devotion, that she clung to him for protectoin, that she was wistful and sad when he left her for more than an hour or two, and that she hungered for his caresses and endearing words.

Often when he looked up from a book or a newspaper he would find her eyes fixed upon him, dreamily, as though the sight of him filled her with quiet joy. If he walked across the lawn, he knew that her eyes followed him. If he came to her suddenly and took her unawares, her face, rather sad in repose, would suddenly light up with a look of shining gladness.

In the evenings she was happy to rest her head on his shoulder while he was reading or smoking. She had

pretty words of love for him, such as that "Dear heart," so often on her lips. Often she would put her hands upon his shoulders and say, "You are good to look at, Oliver. I am very proud to have such a handsome boy for a husband." Never did she lose her sense of wonderment that she who had come to believe that she would die an old maid should have won this prize of life, this joy of married love.

"Oh, my dear," she said, again and again, "I feel afraid of my own happiness."

Once when she was doing needlework (her hands were seldom idle) Oliver happened to see a tear splash upon the white linen.

He went across to her and touched her hair with his lips.

"Why are you crying? Are you unhappy?"

"No," she said, wiping her wet lashes and laughing at her own emotion. "I am crying because I am so happy. How stupid!"

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### POOR RELATIONS

Before Oliver settled down to work he had his mother and sister to stay at The Rookery, but before they came he sent in advance a cheque for twenty pounds, so that they might come well dressed, and in a style worthy of him now that he was a country gentleman. He had already been very generous to his family. He made his father a monthly allowance to help with the household expenses, which were heavier now that they had moved (on his advice) from Rosemary Avenue to a larger house on Streatham Hill. He was so generous indeed that Virginia, who had made over her cheque-book to him, was startled by the amount of money he had spent in a few months.

"My dear," she said, "you must be careful, you know. My income is not elastic."

She pointed to certain items in the pass book.

"What are these names? They are not local tradesmen, are they? Fifteen pounds. What was that, Oliver?"

Oliver was for a moment or two rather embarrassed. He coughed slightly and said. "They were some old debts of mine that came in unexpectedly. To tell the truth, I had utterly forgotten them."

"But, Oliver, you told me that you had paid all your debts before our marriage."

"Yes. I believed that was so. I had forgotten these wretched things."

She looked very serious.

"You gave me your word of honour that you had paid everything."

"My dear girl," said Oliver, rather irritably, "do you want me to repeat the words again? I had forgotten these things."

"But you should not have forgotten."

She said that very decidedly, and he avoided her eyes as she stood before him with the bank-book in her hand.

"I hope you have not forgotten others," she said, in a rather distressed voice. "Can you be sure of that, Oliver?"

"Fairly sure," said Oliver.

"But you must be quite sure."

Her voice was tremulous now.

"I do wish you were not so careless about money matters. I hate the very idea of debt."

That little breeze blew over in the usual way. Oliver put his arms around his wife's waist and kissed her, promising that no other debt should poke up its ugly head to scare her.

When his mother and sister came he was delighted with their appearance, and Galatea especially was a pride to him. She was charmingly dressed, with great taste and simplicity, so that she looked prettier than he had ever seen her before. She had obtained a fortnight's holiday from the office and did not have typist's headache or jangled nerves while she was at Windlesham. But she was a little sad (the sadness touched her face with a new refinement), for Charles Hardy was still out of a "job" in Fleet Street, and was earning a precarious living as a freelance, so that all thoughts of marriage were postponed. Oliver whispered to her one evening that she had better look out for another husband, and he brought over two young gentlemen from Georgian houses in the High Street, with the obvious intention of providing Galatea with an agreeable choice. But Galatea was rather silent and haughty with both the young men, who on their side were a little ill at ease with the dark-haired girl who responded in monosyllables to their conversational efforts. So Oliver's plan failed, but, notwithstanding that, he enjoyed the visit of his mother and sister and took great trouble to give them a good time—putting all thought of work entirely on one side.

The Dowager Countess of Buntingford fell in love at once with Galatea, and invited them all to dinner. It was unfortunate that Virginia was too tired to go, but Oliver drove his mother and sister over to Buntingford

House, and saw for the first time the faded glories of that ancient mansion where Queen Elizabeth had once slept on a Royal progress, and where Rupert had once dined with a party of his cavaliers on the way to Worcester.

Old Lady Buntingford, in a black silk dress and lace shawl, looked like one of the ghost ladies of the house as she sat in a great leather armchair, with the red light of a log fire in a deep chimney-place glowing upon her silver hair and beautiful old parchment face. The only drawback to Oliver's pleasant evening was his mother's habit of saying "My lady" to the old Countess, as though she were her housekeeper or one of the servants.

There were tea-parties also, at Miss Purchase's house in the High Street, and at the Vicar's house next to St. Ursula's, and Virginia's drawing-room resounded with the laughter of women, with the high-pitched voices of the old ladies, and with the tinkle of tea-cups, on many afternoons during that fortnight when Oliver's mother and Galatea were staying at The Rookery. Oliver enjoyed himself immensely, for, as the one young man among these dear, old-fashioned women, he received flattering homage.

His mother could not quite believe in the reality of it all. It seemed to her utterly strange and bewildering that her boy Oliver should be the master of such a great house, and the part-owner of so much splendour. It seemed to her, as she confessed to him, that they were all staying in an expensive boarding-house, from which they, and he, would return to a more humble sphere of life.

Oliver was tremendously amused at the idea, and laughed heartily.

"Mother," he said, "you see I have kept my promise. I have raised the family fortunes."

"Yes, my dear Roly," said Mrs. Lumley. "It is all very queer."

She sighed, and said rather timidly:

"I wish, dear, you did not owe quite so much to your wife."

"That is a stupid idea," said Oliver rather sharply. "A husband and wife share all things in common."

When Mrs. Lumley and Galatea had to go back Oliver made them each a present. To his mother he gave a

cheque for five pounds, and into Galatea's hand he slipped a sovereign—" to buy you a hat," he said. To his annoyance, Galatea refused to take it.

" I don't think it is right, Roly. It is Virginia's money, and she has been so generous to us already."

" Please yourself," said Oliver. " All you people are so devilish haughty."

His mother kissed him on both cheeks, and was much moved at saying good-bye.

" My poor boy ! You are very young to be a husband. But you are happy, and have a good wife, Oliver. I think my prayers have been answered."

" You do not seem quite sure, mother. You seem a little doubtful about it all."

Mrs. Lumley sighed.

" Marriage is a great adventure, dear."

Doing her needlework at home she had thought over the difficulties of life. She had brooded over the meaning of things, and had obtained some knowledge that is gained by disappointment and drudgery and love.

When they had gone, Oliver felt lonely. The leaves had fallen from the trees now, and darkness set in early.

" Dear heart," said Virginia, " you must write your book now. You have been idle long enough. Oh, yes, I insist."

So Oliver shut himself up in the library and began to work.

## CHAPTER XL

### THE BROKEN IMAGE

Oliver did not work like the very dickens. With the best intentions in the world, he found it very difficult to write a book which would fulfil Virginia's ideals, and be worthy, not only of a man of letters, but of a country gentleman.

He thought out vaguely, and in a general way (leaving the details for the inspiration of the moment), a rather ambitious and sweeping plot. It centred round a young man of great wealth who desired to reform the world. But first he had to obtain knowledge, and learn the secrets of the human heart in high places and in low. He was to wander about Europe at first (starting in Paris), meeting strange adventures on the way, and then live for a while in the underworld of London, where he would come face to face with tragedy and awful squalor. Finally, by a scheme involving several millions and a combination of philanthropic effort, he would establish a central bureau, with branches in every capital, for the relief of destitution in its most piteous forms, and as a kind of agency for the healing of broken lives.

It cost Oliver considerable brain-racking to get that plot into something like shape, and, although he made copious notes, a month or two passed before he wrote Chapter I on the top of a blank page. From time to time, also, it was essential, as he explained to Virginia, that he should get some relaxation for his body and brain—otherwise he would be stale before the story began—and he made several trips (a week-end in Paris, a fortnight in London, and shorter dashes to the great city and back), in order to get "atmosphere."

"What does 'atmosphere' exactly mean?" asked Virginia anxiously. "Don't you think it is rather a waste of time and money? That week-end in Paris was most expensive."

"I am sorry," said Oliver, "but I must get atmosphere. Otherwise my book is hopeless. I must visualise things. You have to get your facts right first, and then bring your imagination into play."

"Do as you think best," said Virginia; "but I shall be so glad when you have made a really good start with the book."

He made several false starts, and then went to tea with the Honourable Mrs. Perceval.

He had got into the habit of going to tea, and, sometimes to supper, with that lady rather frequently, because she lived in an old-fashioned house, low and rambling, three miles from Windlesham, on the Worcester road, so that it made a pleasant walk—not too long, and not too short—when he wanted to shake off the megrims.

It was almost by accident that he met her the first time, at the end of his walk. He had stopped, it is true, to look up at her house, but he had not expected to see her reclining on the veranda in a pink frock and an easy-chair. She must have seen him coming, for when he stopped outside her gate, she called out to him:

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lumley! How kind of you to call on me—just when I was feeling bored unto death."

After that he had to go through her garden gate and renew his acquaintanceship. So he stayed to tea, and on his way home was surprised to remember how gay and brilliant he had been in her company. Of course, she was an arrant flirt, he could not deny that, for she used her eyes in the most impudent way, and was very daring in her conversation, but she had certainly a keen sense of humour, and a gift of repartee, and an amusing candour which was rather refreshing to him.

She told him, among other things, that her heart beat in sisterly sympathy with him. She pitied him exceedingly, and might almost suggest (if he were not a married man), that they should hold hands and shed tears together.

"In Heaven's name, why?" asked Oliver.

"Because we both come from the great, gay city to spend a married life in this rustic desolation. Oh, it is a living burial! . . . The dreary winter! The dullness! The utter, utter boredom! . . . I can only keep myself

alive by quarrelling with my husband. He is so delicate, poor dear, that he cannot and will not live in London. There again Fate has dealt harshly with both of us. We are both married to invalids. Surely there is some mystic union between us, Mr. Lumley ? "

It appeared that Mrs. Perceval's invalid was a soldier husband who had been severely wounded in the South African War, and was now a helpless cripple. Oliver met him one evening, after dinner. He was a good-looking man of thirty-five or so, with a bronzed face and grey hair ; a silent man, who regarded his wife with a curious watchfulness. She quarrelled with him continuously and vivaciously, though he answered in monosyllables, or merely with a shrug of the shoulders. They played bridge that evening, with another Windlesham man, and Oliver lost two pounds, to the great amusement of his hostess, who said :

" What will dear Virginia say ? "

Oliver did not find it convenient to tell Virginia of this loss, but she was distressed because her husband seemed to like the company of the Percevals.

" I try not to listen to scandal," she said, " but I cannot help remembering a most unpleasant story about Mrs. Perceval and a young curate. You would please me very much, Oliver, if you avoided anything like a friendship with her."

" It is not a question of friendship," said Oliver. " But I must study people's characters. A literary man ought not to lead a hermit life."

Virginia sighed, and a look of anxiety crept into her eyes, but she did not say any more about the matter. She only hoped that Oliver would respect her wish. She watched him with an increasing sense of disappointment and uneasiness. It was evident that he was getting into a restless, dispirited mood. Sometimes he was quite irritable with her, and spoke sharply.

The truth was that when the winter came, bringing darkness and white mists which crept out of the woods like ghost legions, and the melancholy of a countryside with naked trees above their rotting leaves Oliver became moody and bored with his life. The intense quietude of Windlesham made him yearn for the glare and bustle of

London life. He missed its theatres, its seething crowds, its continual distractions. The society of elderly ladies did not satisfy him. His active brain needed a more exciting form of social intercourse. He seemed to have exhausted most topics of conversation with Virginia, and was often silent in her company when they sat alone together in the winter evenings.

He joined the Conservative Club in the High Street, and spent a good deal of his time with local squires and solicitors and clergymen's sons, playing billiards or cards, and, without telling Virginia, he often walked the three miles along the Worcester road to spend an hour or two with the Percevals. He did not tell Virginia, because she would have been distressed, and he hated to distress her.

But Mrs. Perceval amused him. It was always a duel of wit with her, and she sharpened his intellect. He liked her best when she was impudent, satirical, and cutting. In her languorous moods, when she reclined on a sofa and bade him sit on a stool by her side and tell her some of his love stories, or some tale of old romance and naughtiness, he disliked her and was afraid of her. When she sang to him in a florid, well-trained voice he wished that he had not come to her house, for there was something in the *timbre* of that voice which gave him a queer feeling down his spine. But the beauty of the woman was undeniable, and her eyes had witchery in them which was sometimes dangerous. More often than he found it discreet to count, he played bridge in the Perceval's house, and his luck, or his skill, was almost invariably bad, so that he lost a good deal of money, in small sums of a sovereign or two. The invalid husband was a genius at the game, and seemed to derive a grim satisfaction in winning money from his wife's friends.

Oliver's absence on those evenings left Virginia alone, and when he came back he would find her generally in the library, doing needlework for the poor women of the parish, or with a book in her lap which she was not reading. Once or twice Oliver was startled by the pallor of her face and by the sorrow in her eyes. Then he had a twinge of conscience and resolved that he would not leave her so much alone. But after a few nights he would have

the old restless feeling, and the craving for the excitement of Mrs. Perceval's drawing-room.

"My dear," he would say to Virginia then, "I must go for a swinging walk to blow the cobwebs out of my eyes. I may look in at the club on my way back."

"Very well, Oliver. Do not be too late."

That was Virginia's answer, for after his protest against leading a hermit's life she had ceased complaining about the constant interruption of his work. She saw that her youthful husband needed brighter society than she was able to give him, and for his sake she was ready to be as lonely again as when unmarried. She was glad that he had joined the Conservative Club where he met men of his own age.

But one night when he came home she said in a quiet voice:

"Do you always go to the club, Oliver, when you stay out like this?"

"Generally," said Oliver. "Why?"

"Do the men scent themselves at your club? Sometimes there is a curious fragrance about your clothes like otto of roses."

Oliver laughed loudly.

"Good Lord, Virginia! What queer ideas creep into that little head of yours!"

But his heart stopped beating for a moment.

"I have a very quick sense of smell," said Virginia.

Later that evening she came and sat on the hearth-rug at his feet and rested her head on his knees.

"Dear heart," she said, "you will always be truthful with me, won't you? I should be very miserable if I could not trust your word of honour. I think that would kill me."

"Have you any reason not to trust me?" said Oliver.

"No. I think not. I hope not. Oliver I am foolish. . . . Sometimes, sitting here alone, I get uneasy suspicions. . . . You do not talk to me so much now. You do not open your heart to me. . . . I sometimes think you have secrets which I do not share."

Oliver did not answer for a moment. Then he said in a rather tremulous voice, "I hope you are not going

to be suspicious of me, dearest. Surely by this time we can trust each other ? "

She drew his head down and kissed him on the forehead.

" Forgive me. . . . I have not been very well lately. I am sure I can trust you."

But a few evenings later, when Oliver had been to tea with Mrs. Perceval, Virginia met her husband in the hall. He saw at once that something had distressed her, for she was very white, and did not smile in return to his greeting. Indeed, when he stooped to kiss her she put out her hand and said, " Not now . . . not now. Oliver I want to speak to you. Let us go into your study."

They went into the small room which Oliver now used as his own private den.

" What is the matter ? " he asked, when the door was shut.

" It is all that matters," said Virginia. " Oliver, I want to ask you a few questions. For God's sake tell me the truth. Where did you go this afternoon ? "

" For a walk," said Oliver.

" Where did you go last night ? "

" To the club."

It was quite true. After leaving the Percevals' he had looked in at the club for five minutes.

" Nowhere else ? "

She looked into his eyes, as though beseeching him to tell the truth.

He hesitated, and went rather pale.

" Why do you catechise me like this ? What is in your mind, Virginia ? "

She put her hands to her head and said, " There is nothing in my mind—except a great fear."

" You are getting hysterical, my dear," said Oliver. " Pray calm yourself."

" Yes, I will be calm," said Virginia. " I ask you again ! Did you go nowhere else last night except to the club ? "

" As far as I remember——" said Oliver, and then he felt very much afraid.

" You are deceiving me," said Virginia. She gave a little moan, and said, " Oliver, you have been

deceiving me for two months. I have found out that you have been to Mrs. Perceval constantly."

"It is true," he said quietly. "I have been there pretty often. I did not tell you, because I know you have a prejudice against the woman."

"I have a prejudice against deceit," said Virginia. She spoke quickly now, and more passionately than ever he had heard her speak.

"Why did you not tell me? Mrs. Perceval is a bad woman, but if you had told me that you wanted to go to her house I should not have forbidden you. I should have no right to forbid you. But you hid the truth from me. You pretended to me. You lied to me."

She put her hands to her throat as though she were stifling.

"Oh, that is what breaks my heart. I believed in your honour, and you lied to me. How can I ever trust you again?"

She was weeping now.

Oliver bent over the sofa, where she sat with her face in her hands.

"Darling, I did not lie to you. I only kept the truth from you. I have been frightfully foolish."

She stretched out her arms to him and he thought he was forgiven, so that his heart leapt up. But she said, "You have broken my beautiful ideal of you. How can I build it up again? Oh, dear heart, you have been a liar to me!"

That mingling of love with condemnation was worse for Oliver to bear than the most passionate reproach.

There were tears in his own eyes now, and his soul was ashamed. He knelt down by his wife's side, and tried to build himself up again—to patch up that broken ideal of himself in Virginia's heart. But he was like Humpty-Dumpty, and not all the king's horses nor all the king's men could quite mend the thing that had been smashed by his own folly and carelessness.

He made her one pledge. He would never go to Mrs. Perceval's again. She accepted that promise and hoped he would keep it. That "hope" showed that she had lost her trust in him.

## CHAPTER XLI

### HAUNTING FEARS

THERE was some talk in Windlesham, among ladies who talked rather too much perhaps, about the disappearance of Alice Featherfew, whom Oliver had called "The Goose-Girl" and "Patient Griselda."

She had left the village suddenly, about four months after Oliver's marriage, and, according to Miss Purchase, the girl's mother "made a mystery of it." She had not gone to service in London, it seemed, like so many of the best Windlesham girls, and Mrs. Featherfew shook her head and sighed loudly and gave other ominous signs of distress when Alice's name was mentioned. On the other hand, she flared up at a direct question—and Miss Purchase was always direct in her questions—and had said very rudely that she would not have people poking their noses into what was no business of theirn.

"I am afraid," said Miss Purchase in Virginia's drawing-room one day, "that there is only one interpretation to be put upon this affair. You know what I mean, my dear?"

Virginia said that she could believe nothing very bad of Alice. She had been a very good girl, and had behaved in a modest way in the choir. She had a sweet voice, too, and her eyes were as innocent as a child's.

"Ah," said Miss Purchase grimly, "I distrust those girls with big innocent eyes."

Lady Buntingford was of opinion that Miss Purchase would distrust an angel if she met her in the High Street. As for Alice Featherfew, if the poor child had got into trouble it would be their bounden duty to help her by all means in their power.

"I have no patience with that self-righteous cruelty which casts stones at these poor girls. They are led

astray not so much by evil instincts as by trustfulness in false promises. We women are very weak, my dears."

Virginia's pale cheeks flushed. She thought the conversation was getting out of bounds.

But she turned to Oliver, who happened to be in the room, and said, "You always found Alice very nice and respectable, Oliver?"

"Very," said Oliver, and then he strolled out of the room to smoke a cigarette.

But in his study he turned rather faint and white, and an overwhelming sense of fear took possession of him. He put his hand in his breast-pocket and drew out a crumpled letter. It was written in a big childish handwriting. As he read it his hand trembled.

*Dear Sir,*

*I am in grate truble. i have been sent away from home i hope i shal dy i have told noboddy your luving*

*Alice.*

He put a corner of the letter into the flame of a candle on the mantelpiece, and watched the paper burn to a curling cinder until his own fingers were singed. Then he said, "Good God! Good God!" and sat in a chair, holding its arms and staring at the opposite wall like a man struck down by some blow of fate.

But the weeks passed and the months, and he heard no more about Alice, and the fear almost passed from him, and his memory of that strange, ill-spelt letter which he had burnt in the candle-flame. Only now and again, as he walked out in the darkness of night or sat alone in his study, did he think of the fresh-complexioned girl with the childish blue eyes to whom he had told fairy-stories in Myrtle Cottage. This ghost-face stared into his then with haunting eyes, so that he went pale and tried to blot it out by other thoughts. When it came to him unexpectedly, at odd times, a dread of something terrible to come, of some discovery, made him dumb and cold, so that once he had to gulp down neat whisky to steady his nerves and overcome this weakness.

He was ploughing through his book now more steadily,

though again with periods of inactivity, and with many interruptions. For often he was very bored with his own work, and loathed the sight of his scrawling handwriting on a pile of loose sheets. He felt that all inspiration had gone out of him. He was writing feeble, conventional stuff. He put off the time of reading it to Virginia. He told her that he would rather read it as a whole to her, so that she should get the broad general effect. He had taken to riding a horse now—Virginia had agreed to that expense for the sake of his health—and he would go for long, lonely rides as far as Worcester, or round the neighbouring country. He also did a good deal of shooting, for he was friendly now with many of the old generals and county men around, and they were glad to let him join the guns. This kept him in fine physical form, and as a rule he was in high spirits. He thoroughly enjoyed his life as a country gentleman, and the days seemed far back when he was a penniless fellow in a middle-class suburb. Yet it was not many months ago.

He gave pleasant dinner-parties at The Rookery, and put good wine before his guests. As he sat at the head of his table he did not regret the road up which he had been led by fortune. On the whole, he had done well for himself.

Unfortunately a change seemed to have come over Virginia. She was inclined to be stern with him, and to treat him, not so much as a husband to whom she owed reverence and honour, as a wayward youth who required discipline.

"Confound it!" he said once or twice to himself, "she comes the schoolmistress over me too much."

He did not say that to her, for, to tell the truth, he was a little afraid of his delicate wife—afraid of her reproachful eyes, and her sadness, and out of her silence even. He had come to the conclusion that her spirituality was rather beyond his reach. He wished that her ideals were not quite so exalted, and that her sense of honour would not be so clear-cut and rigid. He pitied himself sometimes for being, at his time of life, when flushed with the wine of youth and with hot blood in his veins, the husband of an invalid. He was

inclined to admire his self-sacrifice in having made such a marriage.

But his great trouble about Virginia was her "nearness" with regard to money. She had inherited a spirit of economy from her stern old father, which, he thought, was hardly right for a woman of property.

She accused him of extravagance a hundred times.

"I am not so rich as you imagine. You must really understand, Oliver, that it costs a great deal of money to keep up this household and the garden, and that my income is hardly more than sufficient. We cannot afford to indulge in needless luxuries or in lavish entertainment. Your personal expenses seem to me extraordinary. What do you do with all the money?"

He could not quite explain that, except by saying that he had to live and dress like a gentleman. As a matter of fact he was not, he thought, unduly lavish upon his personal expenditure. The only items which gave him a twinge of conscience were his card debts—they played for rather high stakes at the club, and in the country houses around—and his generous tips to the servants of his friends. Generosity in tipping was a weakness of his, and mounted up most damnably.

"Surely, my dear girl," he said one day very irritably, when Virginia had gone into the details of the bank balance, over which she kept a closer watch now, "you are not going to fling your money in my face? I understood we were to share everything in common. If you want to put me into position of a pauper——"

"I want you to be careful," said Virginia. "Look at all these items—self—self—self—self. You are always drawing money which does not go to pay household bills, or anything that I can account for. I do not know what you do with it all."

She clasped her hands in her lap and looked across to him where he sat nursing a well-gaitered leg.

"I thought once that you would be earning money of your own. But I have almost given up that hope. It seems to me your book will never be finished."

"It will never be finished if I am worried about money matters," said Oliver. "I thought I had got away from all that wretchedness."

## CHAPTER XLII

### THE FATHER OF THE GIRL

THERE came a time when money affairs began to embarrass him most seriously, and when all his troubles in Barton Street, Westminster, were but trivial to this new anxiety, beyond which lay a great fear.

It began with the meeting of a carpenter and boat-builder in the lower town. He was walking home in the dusk of a winter afternoon when the man stepped out in the roadway and stood in front of him.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Lumley. Might I have a word with 'ee?"

"What is it, my man?"

He was a middle-aged man with a brown beard and sharp blue eyes.

"It is summat that has best not be spoke out i' the street. I'll trouble you to come inside my shed. There'll be no secrets heard there."

"I'm in a hurry. If you have anything to say, speak it out now, my good fellow."

"I don't know about my being your good fellow. But maybe you'll be less in a hurry when I tell 'ee I am Alice Featherfew's feyther."

Oliver suddenly felt very cold. Without a word, he followed the man into the shed.

He sat down on a carpenter's bench with his feet in the shavings. It was almost dark in the workshop.

"What about Alice?" he said, in a voice that sounded queer to his own ears. "She used to work for me in Myrtle Cottage."

"Yes, that's true enough," said the man. "You can't get away from that. It was ten months ago. All the townsfolk can swear to that."

"What do you mean?"

Oliver stood up and faced the man. But those sharp blue eyes seemed to bore into his own like gimlets.

"I don't know exackly what I does mean. I haven't exackly made up my mind."

He thrust a bit of paper into Oliver's hand.

"Read that. Maybe it'll help 'ee to think out what I mean, when I've made up my own mind to what I does mean exackly."

"How the devil can I read it?" said Oliver. "It is dark."

"Aye, I forgot it was dark. We'll make a bit o' light."

He lit an oil lamp slowly and deliberately. It made a horrid smell in the shed.

"She writes plain. You'll be able to read it now, with this 'ere lamp to light 'ee."

He held the lamp above Oliver's head. And Oliver read some ill-spelt words in a big childish handwriting. There were only a few words.

*Dear Feyther,*

*I didn't want to tell he was very kind to me and didn't mean no harm it was Mr. Ollerver Lumley o my pove hart.*

*Your luving,*
*Alice.*

Oliver let the paper fall into the shavings.

"It's a lie," he said, in a strangled voice.

"It's Gord's truth," said the brown-bearded man.

"You have no proof. I deny it."

A big brown hand clasped his right shoulder with an iron grip.

"Then you'll have to deny it, Mr. Ollerver Lumley, to all Windlesham. I'll raise the whole town against 'ee, and it's your own wife what'll be the first to hear."

"What do you want me to do?" said Oliver.

He swung himself free from the man's grip and paced up and down the dimly-lighted shed.

"Ah, now you're talking," said Alice Featherfew's father. "That is what I've been axing myself. What be 'ee going to do, Mr. Ollerver Lumley? What be 'ee going to do?"

## CHAPTER XLIII

### THE BLACKMAILERS

OLIVER had to do many things during the next few months which gave a haggard look to his face and kept him awake at nights and made him afraid of going out-of-doors, and start and tremble when his wife came suddenly into a room where he was sitting, or said, "Oliver, may I speak to you for a moment?"

Because he was a hunted man, with a pack of wolves sniffing round his heels in Windlesham, ready to tear him to pieces if he did not throw food to them. They snarled and grimaced at him, and their appetite grew with what they fed on.

John Featherfew was the leader of the pack, and a hungry, cunning, cruel old wolf. But there was Alfred Featherfew, his drunken, ne'er-do-weel son, and Moll Featherfew, his fat, sluttish wife, and William Featherfew, his brother, who kept a beer tavern in the worst street in Windlesham, down by the river, and William Featherfew's vixen wife, a thin drab of a woman, with a shrill, cackling laugh and high-pitched voice, and William Featherfew's son Jock, who was a gardener to Mrs. Perceval, and a big, bullying lout who had ruined many girls in the town.

Oliver knew them all now—the whole pack. They had stalked him when he went out for walks or rides. They had touched hats to him with a "Beg pardon, Mr. Ollerver Lumley, I'm one of the Featherfews, and I'm willing to keep a shut mouth if so be as it's worth my while."

That was what Jock had said with his hand on Oliver's saddle strap.

Oliver raised his whip to slash the fellow across the face, but at the man's gruff laugh he had dropped his arm and said, "What on earth do you want?"

"I want summat to go on with," said Jock. "I'll take a pound or two for a start. Silence be golden, they say."

He laughed with hoarse mirth, as though he had made a good joke.

Oliver threw two sovereigns on to the roadway.

"You dirty blackmailer!" he said.

The loutish fellow picked them up.

"You'd best mend your manners," he said. "I can tell a story as well as any man."

John Featherfew, the leader of the pack, wanted more than a pound or two as the price of silence. His brain was active and he thought out many schemes for improving his condition in life. His old shed wanted rebuilding. It was tumbling about his very ears. No doubt Mr. Ollerver Lumley would lend a helping hand. How much? Well, a matter of fifty pounds would do the job, and nicely.

Then there was his boy, Alf. Alf had been a trouble to him. Couldn't find no settled way o' life. But he had a notion of starting a farm in Canada. Maybe Mr. Ollerver Lumley as a friend o' the family would give him a start out West? Another fifty. That 'ud fix him up. Windlesham would be glad to see the last of Alf. It would be a blessing to everyone.

Mrs. William Featherfew's mother was an ailing woman. Her man had died a year come Michaelmas. She was left with just a roof above her head. The old soul would like a little comfort in her last days. A few pounds would make her merry and bright. Oh yes, she had heard of Mr. Ollerver Lumley. But she could keep her tongue between her teeth.

It was a conspiracy. These people were a gang of blackmailers, as cunning as devils, and just as cruel. Oliver could not escape from them. If he stepped outside The Rookery one of them was sure to be hanging round the gates, ready to give him a "Good marnin' to 'ee. There be just a little thing, Mr. Ollerver Lumley——"

They invited him to tea in their cottages, for family conferences.

They shut him up in their overheated parlours, and

talked in whispers to him, or banged heavy fists on the tea-table, so that the cups rattled, or laughed with a high cackling mirth like witch laughter. He met a Featherfew as far away as Merdingham, fifteen miles through the woodlands. He was a shepherd, and wanted a new sheep-dog. Sometimes he came into Windlesham on a market day. He was old friends with "Miss Virginia." The girl Alice was his own niece. Not that he wanted to give Mr. Lumley away for a mistake which may happen upon any young man. Still a niece was a niece, and the same with a sheep-dog.

Oliver made many visits to the bank. He did not care to write cheques out to the family of Featherfew. Nor would they take cheques. They liked the glint of gold.

The shame and the terror of it all! Oliver waited for that day when his wife would want to know how he had overdrawn the account which she had made out in his name. It came as last, but even then too soon for the invention of any reasonable explanation.

She came to him in his study and said, "Oliver, what is the meaning of this? You have been spending money like water. The account is overdrawn."

"Overdrawn?" he said. "Surely not?"

She was very grave, and there was a look of deep suspicion in her eyes—of suspicion and anger.

"I must go into this. I cannot leave it in uncertainty. What are all these mysteries?"

"Mysteries?"

"Yes, mysteries. On the fifteenth of January fifty pounds to 'self,' on the twelfth of February another fifty, on the fifteenth of February five pounds, on the twentieth ten pounds."

She let the book fall from her hand on the carpet, and said in a low voice:

"Oliver, I do not beg of you to tell me the truth—I command you."

"Command? That is hardly a word to use to your husband, my dear."

He tried to laugh, but the sound rattled in his throat.

"I trusted you with my money. It is the money my father earned by service to his country. What,

in your laziness, have you done with it? On what have you wasted it?"

He had not seen this Virginia before. She had never spoken words like that to him. Her pale face was flushed now. Her eyes were very wide open, very luminous. In that moment, when his soul shuddered with cowardice, he thought how beautiful she was, taller, stronger, less frail. There was a fighting spirit in her eyes. She was extraordinary like the portrait of her father as a young man, over the chimneypiece in the dining-room, in the uniform of the Royal Artillery, with the delicate, aquiline face of Napoleon when he was the young general of Italy.

Oliver thrust out his hands, and said, "Virginia, dear wife, I cannot explain those items . . . you must have faith in me."

"Faith in you?"

She repeated the words.

"I am losing faith in you . . . I think I have lost it."

He tried to take her hand, but she plucked it from him.

"No, I am not to be bribed into trustfulness by your kisses. I have gone beyond that."

"I am sorry. Have you got beyond your love for me?"

She raised her head very proudly.

"It is because I love you with my whole heart and soul that I am resolved to have the truth. Your honour is my honour, for I bear your name. Your untruthfulness is my shame, because my life is yours. Oliver, in the name of our love I command you to tell me on what you have spent this money."

His brain was busy with lies. . . . Then he thrust them on one side. He would not sink deeper into the mire.

"I cannot tell you," he said simply. "I can only say that they have cost me more agony than the loss to you."

"Do you decline to tell me?"

"I'm afraid so."

She drooped her head.

"Then it must be a guilty secret. It is something you are afraid to tell me."

"It is not so bad as you think," he said. "One of these days I will tell you."

"Until you tell me," said Virginia, "I shall have no peace. I shall be haunted with the fear of dishonour."

"I swear to you," said Oliver, "that I will never let dishonour touch your name. Do you not believe that?"

She said, "I do not know what to believe. I am only bewildered—and afraid."

## CHAPTER XLIV

### THE OUTCAST

After that painful scene Virginia cancelled Oliver's account at the bank, and took all money matters into her own hands again.

He had not expected that of her. It caused him an agony of humiliation, for he was absolutely dependent upon her now. He took to shaving himself rather than ask her for money to pay the barber. He tried to give up smoking rather than beg of her; but this caused him such intense torture and put such a strain upon his nerves that he could not endure it.

"I must get some tobacco," he said one day sullenly, "and I am penniless."

She passed half a sovereign over to him, and said in her quiet way, "That should last you some time, Oliver."

He hated her at that moment. All that was fierce and brutal in his nature (and the tiger is in every man's heart, however weak he may be) leapt up at his throat.

He was livid with rage and shame.

"You treat me like a dog," he said.

She answered quietly again, "I treat you as one quite irresponsible with regard to money, Oliver. It is best for both our sakes."

"By God, it is intolerable!" he said, and then strode out of the room.

But after he had changed the half-sovereign and smoked the pipe he was sorry for his violence, and his hatred left him. Alone in the room, he shed weak tears because the woman who had been so gentle and dove-like—the dream-lady of his summer idyll, his beautiful, delicate wife—had become his schoolmistress, with a birch rod that lashed his pride and spirit.

It seemed that she was determined to teach him a lesson, to exact a stern punishment for his follies. And she had the whip-hand. He was a pauper, living on her charity. He could not spend half a crown without her knowledge and consent. Katherine was right, after all. She had warned him against all this. She asked him what he would do if his wife turned on him and reproached him with her wealth against his poverty. Well, it had happened, and he was humbled into the dust by the woman he had married. Oh, she could take it out of him now! He had not the pluck of a mouse in her presence.

But there was worse to come. He could not disguise from himself that the last blow was yet to fall.

When would the wolves come howling round The Rookery gates?

They were remarkably quiet. He could not understand the false air of peace about him. Not yet had they given tongue, although he pandered no longer to their appetite.

It was outside the town that he met the leader of the pack after Virginia's discovery of the overdrawn account. John Featherfew was trudging homewards with his bag of tools over his shoulder. He stepped out into the middle of the road and put his hand on Oliver's bridle-rein.

"My old woman," he said, "has taken a bit of a chill. She be fretting for a week-end at the seaside. It'll cost a matter of thirty shillin'. Maybe you've got your purse on 'ee, Mr. Ollerver——"

"You'll never get any more money out of *my* purse, John Featherfew," said Oliver sternly. "Neither you nor any of your blackguardly gang."

"What be that?" said the man, plucking at his brown beard, and with an ugly glare in his steel-blue eyes. Then he laughed and said, "You be jokin', Mr. Ollerver. Lord love 'ee, I can see a joke with the best of 'em."

Oliver bent over his saddle.

"Take your hand off my rein, John Featherfew, or I'll cut it off with this whip."

He raised the whip and set his teeth. He would have

cut the man's wrist to the bone if he had not released the rein and staggered back.

He chirruped to his horse along the road. John Featherfew's voice shouted after him thickly, but the wind swept the man's words back and Oliver did not hear them. He only knew that they were threats.

A week passed, and two weeks. He saw no more of the Featherfews and heard no more of them. It seemed that his defiance had disconcerted them. Perhaps, after all, the pack would not give tongue. Perhaps they had only the pluck of curs, and had shrunk back when threatened with a whip. If so, what a fool he had been to waste all that money on them, to surrender to their blackmailing with such a craven fear! He had a wild hope that the secret which they held would not be blabbed. If so, he might build himself up again in Virginia's heart. He would walk warily, and be very kind to her and play the game. Katherine Goldstein had begged him to do that. That was her farewell message to him before his marriage. "Play the game, Oliver," she had said.

Then Oliver cursed his temperament—the cause of all his folly and misfortune. Why had he been born with such a temperament, dragging him into perilous adventures, pulling him this way and that, making him the slave of his own desires?

On the first day of the third week after his defiance of John Featherfew he had a shock which made him feel rather sick and faint. It was the sight of Mrs. Perceval coming out of the carpenter's shed.

He had kept his promise to Virginia not to go again to the Perceval's house. He could pride himself on keeping that promise at least, and it had not been easy. She had written several notes to him, rebuking him for his absence.

*Our bridge parties are dull without you, and boredom creeps over me again. Why do you shun my amiable society—just as we were getting on so nicely?*

He had answered by polite notes, pleading hard work at his novel, but she did not accept his excuses, and in her last note there was anger and a threat.

*I see you desire to end our friendship. Very well. But when I lose a friend I become an enemy. Do you know how very dangerous I can be?*

He had not answered those words, and now he met the woman again, coming out of the carpenter's shed. She was in her winter furs, and was a tall and beautiful creature.

He lifted his cap as he passed with a swift stride, and she gave a little laugh in answer to his greeting, as though very much amused. He did not like the sound of that laughter. There was something crueli in it. "Do you know how very dangerous I can be?" He remembered those words, and they worried him. What was she doing in Featherfew's shed? He knew that Jock Featherfew was her under-gardener. And remembering that, after a while he had a swift vision of his peril.

He had been walking for half an hour before that vision came to him. Then he turned sharply round and strode back to The Rookery. He would tell Virginia everything, the whole miserable, wretched tale, before others were beforehand with him. But at the garden gate he met Mrs. Perceval again. She had just come out of his house. Her face was rather flushed, but she was smiling.

Seeing Oliver, she stopped, and her smile changed to that light laughter which had jarred upon his ears.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Oliver Lumley. I hope you are quite well."

"Very well, Mrs. Perceval."

"I am so glad. I have just been having a little chat with Virginia. Good-bye."

He did not answer, but walked past her up the gravel-path, and opened the front door with his latch-key.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and the maid-servant was lighting the hall-lamp.

"Where is your mistress?" asked Oliver.

"She has gone to her bedroom, sir. I do not think she is quite well."

"Not well?"

"She asked not to be disturbed."

The girl hesitated.

"I think Mrs. Perceval's visit upset her. She has just gone to her room as white as a ghost."

"I will go and see."

Oliver went slowly upstairs. But on the landing he stopped, and put his hand over his ashen-grey face. Then he opened the bedroom door and went in.

The room was in twilight. He noticed through the open window that there were red feathers in the sky. That meant rain. He had always known rain to follow a sky like that at Windlesham.

Strange that he should think of it now, at this awful moment of his life.

Virginia was on her knees upon the floor, with her arms outstretched upon the bed. She had not heard him come in. She gave a little whimpering moan.

He spoke her name quietly.

"Virginia!"

She raised her head and looked at him. He saw that her face was deadly white. She put one hand upon the bedpost and seemed to lift herself up, and stood before him, silent, with her eyes fixed upon his face. They were tragic eyes.

He strode forward to her for a pace or two and spoke her name again pleadingly. But she answered in a clear, sharp voice which frightened him.

"Do not come near me."

He stood quite still, not knowing what to do or to say. But at last, after what seemed like a long time, he said, "Has Mrs. Perceval told you anything—anything to upset you? She is a lying woman."

"She is a vile woman," said Virginia. "But this time I think she did not lie. I think she explained the mystery of what has been torturing me—I mean the mystery of those payments, and of your silence about them."

She spoke with extraordinary quietude and calmness, but suddenly she cried out in a passionate voice:

"Oliver, for dear God's sake tell me the truth; I mean about Alice."

"What about Alice?" said Oliver. The words could hardly pass his lips. His tongue was parched. There was something on fire in his brain.

"Mrs. Perceval made a terrible accusation against you. If it is untrue I will go down on my knees to you. I will kiss your feet, asking forgiveness, because I have been tempted to believe in your dishonour."

"If it is true, what then?" asked Oliver. They were stupid words, but he could not think properly. He only felt frightfully sorry for Virginia and himself. He was afraid they were going to be rather unhappy. The world had all gone wrong with them—somehow.

"If it is true?"

She echoed his words in a whisper.

For a few moments she stared at him, and then she spoke with a swift passion.

"If it is true I will not suffer you to touch me or to breathe my air. If it is true you are shameless and horrible. If it is true I will punish you and break you."

"It is true," said Oliver.

He went down on his knees before her, pouring out a living stream of words in self-excuse, in remorse, in pleading, in extenuation. He was a fool. He was weak. He was a boy. It had been a mistake, the madness of a moment, the temptation of the devil. If she would forgive him this he would devote his life and soul to her. He had been faithful to her since his marriage. He swore that, by all that was sacred. If she would pardon him this once, he would live and die for her.

She looked down upon him with a terrible severity.

"Once," she said, "I told you some words often on my father's lips: '*Do not surrender God to the enemy for the sake of peace. Never forgive a sin which is not atoned. Punishment must go before forgiveness.*' I will not forgive until you have atoned. Because I love you I will have you punished."

He bowed his head.

"Strike me dead!" he said.

"You know that I cannot strike you, because I am a poor, weak invalid. And I do not wish your death. I wish you to live and be brave and honourable, so that I may love you as I used to love you—as I love you now, as God knows."

She put her hand on his head as he knelt before her. Perhaps she was unconscious of her caressing touch, for she said, without any weakness :

" I shall turn you out of my house. Then you will have to work like an honest man."

He started to his feet and cried out that she could not mean those words.

" By our dear Lord, I vow that I mean them ! " she said. " I cannot breathe the same air with you. Your lies and deceit poison me. Your miserable hypocrisy sickens my soul. I should call myself a vile woman if I let you stay inside my life. I swear that I will turn you out, if I have to call in the police or set my dogs on you. They, poor beasts, have been faithful to me."

" You are mad," said Oliver.

" Yes, I am a little mad."

" If you do what you say you will be as cruel as a devil."

" I will be more cruel to myself than you."

" I shall hate you," said Oliver. " I shall hate you for your hard heart. Good God ! I thought you as gentle as a dove."

" I have my father's heart in a frail body," said Virginia, " and it was a man's heart. He never flinched from duty."

" Duty ? " He laughed with hollow mirth. " Do you call this duty ? "

" Yes ; it is my duty, and I command you to leave my house to-night."

" To-night ? "

He whispered the word.

" To-night. See . . . I will give you money . . . It is here in a purse . . . When you want more I will not refuse you. . . . I will make you an allowance . . . enough to keep you from starvation, but not more than that . . . Take it and go from me, for I will not have you in this house another night."

She thrust a purse before him, but he took it and flung it through the window.

" Damn your money ! " he said. " I am your husband and the master of this house."

She rang the bell violently. Oliver heard it pealing in the kitchen down below.

One of the maidservants came rushing up and opened the door after a swift knock.

"Mary," said Virginia, "please fetch a policeman at once."

The girl stared from the wife to the husband. She was amazed beyond words.

"Mary," said Virginia sharply, "run for a policeman. Do you not hear me?"

"You need not trouble, Mary," said Oliver. He turned to his wife. "I will go," he said, "and may God have mercy on you."

"And on you," said Virginia, "and on the child, Alice. . . . You may go, Mary. I shall not want the policeman."

Mary burst into tears and went sobbing downstairs. She could not understand the scene between her master and mistress. But she knew that something terrible had happened.

Oliver turned to go from his wife's room. Then he stopped at the door and looked back at her.

"Is this our parting? Do we say good-bye for ever?"

She said, "I do not know. I do not know. God knows. Perhaps, if you cleanse yourself—if you atone —if you become an honest man——"

He strode out of the room without another word. On the landing he stopped to listen. He thought he heard Virginia sobbing. He half turned to go back, but after a moment he went downstairs and into his study.

It was quite dark now. He stayed in the darkness, stock still, in the middle of the room. For half an hour he was there motionless. There was no sound in the house, except the loud ticking of his clock upon the mantelpiece.

Presently he went out into the hall, listening intently. The servants had shut themselves in the kitchen. He could hear the faint murmur of their voices. No doubt they were talking about the scene upstairs. Soon all Windlesham would be talking.

Very quietly, like a thief, Oliver took down his

hat and overcoat, and put them on. He moved about like a man in a trance. The Persian cat came out of the dining-room and rubbed against his leg. He stooped down and stroked it for a moment. Then he went out of the house, closing the front door very softly.

The moon was coming up behind a bank of cloud. It cast an inky shadow behind him. He did not go straight to the gate, but moved about the small square lawn under his wife's bedroom window. He was searching for something. He was looking for the purse which he had flung out of the window. He was penniless, and unless he found the purse he would have to walk away somewhere, anywhere. What did it matter ?

He fumbled about a flower-bed. His hands became dirty with the wet mould. Presently he found the purse and thrust it into a side pocket. Then he walked across the lawn to the garden gate.

An owl was hooting on the gable of The Rookery, or in the ivy. He shuddered at the sound. He stared up at his wife's room. It was in darkness, but the moonlight played about the window. He thought of Virginia inside that dark room, on her knees, sobbing. The gate clicked behind him ; he was out in the road, an outcast. He walked like a drunken man in the direction of the station, and once he stopped and put his hands up to his eyes, which were scalded with tears. Once he moaned aloud miserably, like a wounded man.

That evening Oliver Lumley took a late train to London, and when he staggered out on to the platform at Paddington he looked so ill that a porter gave him his arm and helped him to a cab. He drove to a hotel in the Strand.

## CHAPTER XLV

### PHILOSOPHY OF THE OLD SCHOOL

The Dowager Countess of Buntingford quarrelled quite seriously with Virginia, and then kissed her on both cheeks and said, "My bird, if you think I am going to quarrel with you, you are much mistaken. I shall not rest until you are happy again. Goodness alive, I never heard of such a thing!"

The old lady was more distressed than she had been for many years when Virginia had told her the secret of Oliver's disappearance from Windlesham. It was two weeks before she suspected that something had gone wrong in The Rookery, and in Virginia's heart. Oliver had been away often enough before—to Paris, to London, and upon other trips—for any surprise to be caused among his wife's friends during the first week or two of his absence. And Virginia explained the matter very quietly and calmly.

"Oliver had gone up to town to get new knowledge of life. Windlesham is not wide enough for his imagination."

"If I had a young and handsome husband," said Miss Purchase, "I should insist upon going with him. There is temptation at every street-corner in London."

"Alas! and in every lane in the country," said Virginia.

"True, too true!" said Miss Purchase, shaking her head. "Nevertheless I shall be glad to see your husband back. Roving husbands make unhappy wives."

"Nonsense!" said old Lady Buntingford, who invariably contradicted Miss Purchase. "Give the boy a bit of rope, Virginia. I don't hold with tying a husband to one's petticoat. I always used to give perfect liberty to Peregrine. 'Have a good time, my dear,' I used to say, 'and when you come back

my heart will be warm for you. Gracious Heaven! Men want a little change from their women folk."

She looked sharply at Virginia, and said, "I don't like to see you so pale, my dove."

Virginia's pallor increased day by day, and her eyes seemed to become larger and more mystical. She drooped, and could find no strength to walk about the garden, but sat for hours by the French window of her drawing-room with her hands folded in her lap, watching the birds on the lawn. Her maidservants noticed with alarm that she lost her vigilance with regard to dust and disorder. She did not seem to care for the beauty of her house.

It was Mary the parlour-maid who brought this to the notice of Lady Buntingford.

"I do believe the mistress is sickening. The other day I left a broom in the library and she did not so much as say 'How careless!' She is that quiet she makes me frightened."

"Child," said Lady Buntingford, "perhaps the good God is going to send us a baby to play with. That would make us very happy."

"Oh, my lady!" cried Mary, clasping her hands, "I never thought of that."

But Lady Buntingford was more frightened than Mary when she spoke one day to Virginia about a dream-child that was coming to The Rookery and was answered by a passion of tears. Virginia flung herself down upon the floor and laid her head in the old lady's lap and wept so that her body shook.

"Now, then, what is the matter with the wench?" asked Lady Buntingford.

She put both her hands upon Virginia's head, and kissed her hair, and said, "Hush, my pigeon, hush, my white dove!"

But Virginia did not cease sobbing until the old lady, after many tender little cries, pretended to become very angry and scolded her, and called her an hysterical baggage.

"I am surprised. Where's your self-control? Good God, my bird, you will drown yourself in these silly tears."

Then Virginia knelt up and thrust her hair back, and said, "I am a fool, and the most unhappy woman."

"Unhappy, be hanged!" said Lady Buntingford, who was unconventional in her speech when stirred by excitement. "You have got a beautiful house and a charming husband——"

"I have no husband. He had gone from me for ever."

The old lady gasped.

Then she said, very drily, "Oh, indeed. Where's he gone to? Have you buried him in the back garden?"

"He has gone out of my life," said Virginia with a little moan.

"You mean to say that you have had a tiff? You quarrelled with him because he came down to breakfast with a headache and a bad temper? Is that what you mean, ma'am?"

"It was a tragedy," said Virginia. "He has broken my heart."

"I know those tragedies, my squirrel. They always happen in the first year of marriage. I once broke my heart because Peregrine tore my lace skirt with his spur, and then said 'Damn.' Of course I boxed his ears, and then he went up to town for a week-end, poor dear."

She put her hands on Virginia's shoulders and said, "I will shake you if you are such a silly fool, lambkin. Where are your wits? Where is your woman's sense? Oliver has gone away, has he? Well, fetch him back again, mighty quick."

But when Virginia laid her heart bare and told her story and came to that scene when she had sent Oliver out of the house the old woman shook with rage.

"Damnation!" she said. "Here is folly and wickedness for an old woman's ears! You ought to be whipped, Mistress Virginia. Upon my soul, I would love to give you a good hiding. . . . As for that Perceval woman, I will scratch her face the very next time I see her. . . . The boy behaved badly with Alice, did he? Well, that was before his marriage, and he was faithful to you ever afterwards. Are we to cast our men off for one indiscretion in their bachelor days? Gracious

Heavens! Peregrine's infidelities were past counting. I shut my eyes to them and refused to count. Young men are young fools. You don't expect them to be archangels, do you? Now, what in the world has happened to that boy Oliver? Of course you have sent him straight to the devil. That is nice Christian charity, upon my word! Here is a pretty story for Miss Purchase and the village cats!"

That was when Lady Buntingford and Virginia quarrelled.

Virginia drew herself up very straight, and begged Lady Buntingford to remember herself. She was surprised at such immoral words. Oliver had sinned and he must be punished. He had deceived her cruelly, and she would not tolerate deceit or lies. He had been utterly demoralised, utterly lazy, and there would be no chance for him in life until he had repented and atoned. She had determined to break him, in order that he might build himself up anew. Did Lady Buntingford think that a wife should tolerate such outrage? To sit with folded hands while her husband sinned against his vows and covered his wife with shame and dishonour? She had been brought up in a different school. Her father had taught her not to surrender God for the sake of peace, not to forgive sin until it had been punished.

"Your father!" cried Lady Buntingford, throwing up her hands. "I remember the man. A hot-tempered, hard, unrelenting old humbug. I once danced with him, and he kicked me on the shin. Most characteristic of him, my dear."

"How dare you speak of my father like that?"

Virginia's eyes flashed fire at the old woman.

"Oh, you won't frighten me, ma'am!" said Lady Buntingford. "I should speak plain words about the devil to his own black face. I thank God I come of a good old English stock. . . . All I can say to you, my babe, is that you have made a pretty hash of things. Get your boy back, and go down on your bended knees to him."

"When I have brought him to his knees, before me, and before God, when he has cleansed himself

in the fire of contrition, when he stands up an honest man, I will forgive him and take him back," said Virginia, very solemnly.

And then she added with her hands to her bosom and a sharp cry of pain, " But my poor heart is broken and will never be mended."

" It deserves to be broken," said Lady Buntingford. " I never heard of such outrageous conduct. If I had behaved to Peregrine like you have done to Oliver he would have flogged me with his hunting-crop, and I should have been a better woman for it."

So the two women quarrelled, and for a week Virginia did not see Lady Buntingford again. The old woman sulked at Buntingford House and was very fractious with her servants. But at the end of that time she drove over to The Rookery, and took Virginia's hands and said, " My pigeon, I am not going to quarrel with you. I am going to straighten out this tangle, so help me God."

## CHAPTER XLVI

### THE BITTER CUP

OLIVER was in a great rage with life when he left Windlesham.

Having recovered from the first shock of his humiliation, he became passionately and violently angry, and then, when the fire had burnt out, sullen. Lurking somewhere in his brain was regret for his folly, remorse for his own weak and selfish acts ; but he ignored those whispering voices, and listened only to the cry of hatred in his heart against Virginia, his wife.

He could hardly believe that any woman could treat her husband with such deliberate cruelty. Yet Virginia —a saint from a stained-glass window—had turned him out of her house ! A shrew-woman would not have gone so far in her revenge. Yet Virginia—delicate, gentle, once so full of tenderness—had been brutal with him !

Very well. He would not grovel before her. She had cast him off, and he would not crawl back to her. If ever he went back it would be in answer to her pleading. She must go down on her knees and beg forgiveness before he would pardon her for all that she had caused him to suffer—for this burning shame. He would show her that he had the stuff of manhood in him.

From his hotel in the Strand he wrote to her a letter heaped with reproaches.

*All my faults,* he said, *are trivial in comparison with your unforgiving hardness—and hardness in a woman is most damnable and most unpardonable. You say I deceived you. Good God ! What was my deceit (I am not conscious of any) to yours ? You have deceived me from the beginning. I thought you a gracious woman full of charity. You are as unrelenting as a religious fanatic, beyond whose cruelty the devil himself cannot go. I*

*thought you were one of those beautiful wives who would overlook the indiscretions of a husband for the sake of his love and protection. So far from overlooking, you have played the spy on me, and listened to the slander of my enemies.*

Then he launched his ultimatum.

*You will suffer more than I shall. I can hear the buzz of the gossipmongers in Windlesham—about a wife without a husband. Old Miss Purchase will spread the news. She will not tire of the scandal in six months. Oh, gossip will yap round your skirts!*

*Perhaps one day you will repent of your hardness. You will be weary of your loneliness. But I give you this warning. Not until you cry out for me, not until you beseech me to come back to you, not until you pray for my forgiveness, not until you have humbled yourself to the depths of humiliation where I now stand, will you hear from me again.*

*When you have that message for me, it will no doubt be forwarded from my mother's house to any place where I may find a lodging or a friend.*

They were strong words. But as the days went by there were hours when Oliver Lumley was filled with an overwhelming sense of pity for his own miserable situation, and had a shuddering fear of the fate that was closing round him.

He took a bed-sitting-room in the Blackfriars Road—a dismal, wretchedly-furnished lodging, which seemed to be haunted by the ghosts of other poor devils who had been his predecessors there. The smell of their stale tobacco-smoke hung about the curtains.

It did not brighten his spirits when his drab of a landlady told him that the last gentleman who rented the room had committed suicide with a razor borrowed for that purpose from another gentleman downstairs.

"'E made a 'orrid mess," said the woman, "and it took me a deal of trouble to clear up. You see, I couldn't get the stines out of the carpet no'ow."

She pointed to some dark smudges by the sofa.

"I tried turps on it, but it wasn't a bit of good—the dirty devil!"

In the bed-sitting-room of a suicide Oliver sat for many hours each day, like a hunted man who is afraid to show himself in the light of day. Indeed, that idea came to his landlady, who asked if he had done anything "wrong." She didn't want no bother with the police.

He laughed at that and reassured her.

"I am only down on my luck. But as long as I pay you in advance you need not worry."

"Yus," said the landlady, "money in advance is the rule of this house, and don't you forgit it, young man, or out you goes."

So Oliver, who had paid four weeks in advance, stayed in trying to write short stories, and desperately anxious to avoid old friends, who would ask him awkward questions, and grin, as friends do, at his misfortune.

But his writing was a failure. He could think of no other plot but the drama of his own misery. Often he found himself staring at the black stains on the threadbare carpet, close to the horsehair sofa. They had a horrible fascination for him. All the details of the man's suicide haunted his imagination. The gentleman was "'orribly pore," said the landlady. They found three-halfpence in his pocket when the police searched his corpse—three-halfpence and some pawn-tickets. Oliver wondered how long it would be before he also came down to his last three-halfpence. Not very long, perhaps.

He saw himself within easy distance of it after visits to Livvy O'Brien and his family. For three weeks he had lived utterly alone in London, speaking to no one except his slatternly landlady. But one afternoon when he had actually finished a short story and sent it off to one of the magazines which used to accept his work, he had an irresistible yearning for human intercourse—a tremendous need of some touch of sympathy.

The sound of Livvy's laughter seemed to whisper in his ears, and he saw her dancing eyes and her roguish Irish face. Remembrance of many hours he had passed with her, of her comradely kindness, of that evening when she had emptied her purse before him, and of that night when he had kissed her on the lips, came thrilling back to

him. Perhaps Livvy would lend him—— no ; he thrust back that tempting thought. He would take nothing but her comradeship.

He went round to her rooms in the afternoon, and was immensely glad to find her at home.

She opened the door to him and said, " Roly ! After all these months ! I had given you up as one of my lost sheep."

He remembered then that he had never told her of his marriage. He had not even troubled to write a line to her. He was sorry now that he had been so forgetful.

She opened the door wider, and said, " The kettle is singing on the hob. You are just in time for tea. I think you must have smelt the muffins."

He took her hand and held it longer than he need have done.

" You look five years younger, Livvy. Where have you been gathering those roses for your cheeks ? "

" And you look very ill," said Livvy. " Horribly ill, Roly. What in the world is the matter with you ? "

" I have had rotten luck. I think I have been quite ill. But I feel better at the sight of you, Livvy, mavourneen."

" Flatterer ! " said Livvy, with a touch of her old roguishness.

" Where's Doris ? " said Oliver, following her into the sitting-room.

" Doris is making tiny socks and Tom Thumb clothes for a little angel expected in a naughty world."

" Good Lord, you don't mean to say she is going to have a baby ? Is she married ? "

Livvy pretended to be shocked at such a question.

" Young man, remember your manners and your morals. Doris Fortescue is now Mrs. Henry Higginbottom, and a most respectable married woman of six months' standing, with a semi-detached house at West Dulwich. She met him at Birmingham, where she was in ' The Merry Peasant ' crowd. He wears a bald head and a white waistcoat, and travels in ladies underlinen."

" I think she might have let me know," said Oliver. " I would have sent her a wedding-present. Good little Doris, so she is settled in life at last ! "

"Well, of all the audacity!" cried Livvy, who was poking the fire under the kettle. "A young man disappears from London for goodness knows how long, does not send one word of his whereabouts to his true and trusty friends, and then turns up coolly and says 'she might have let me know!'"

Oliver was becoming suspicious.

Livvy was trying to conceal some excitement, and there was an unusual appearance of festivity in her rooms. There were little cakes on the tea-table, and a pile of crumpets on the hob gave out a rich aroma. There were flowers on the mantelshelf, and in a big vase on the small round table in the window.

"Are you giving a tea-party? Why all these preparations?"

"I am expecting a friend," said Livvy, and then laughed and blushed.

"A friend? Who is he?"

"I didn't say it was a 'he.' Why not a 'she,' for example?"

She was bending over the flower-vase now, breathing in the fragrance of some jonquils.

"Livvy," said Oliver, "*you* are not married, are you?"

She turned round and cried with a pretty air of surprise:

"Married! What put that into your head?"

He saw a ring glinting on the third finger of her left hand. He strode forward and took the hand and said, "What do you call that?"

"I may be mistaken," said Livvy, "but I call it a ring."

"It is a new ring. You used not to wear it. It is an engagement ring."

"God bless me, so it is!" said Livvy, as though she had just received a revelation. Then her mockery left her, and she clasped Oliver's hand and said:

"Roly, wish me luck. I shall not be an old maid after all!"

But Oliver was strangely depressed by this news. He was annoyed beyond words that Livvy should have become engaged during his absence. He had come back to

her rooms expecting her to cry for joy at his return, perhaps a few tears, perhaps an agony of despair when, very gently, he would have told her of his marriage, perhaps the surrender of her heart after the story of his miserable unhappiness, and of his separation from his wife. So she had not waited for him after all! He felt more lonely and more miserable.

"I wish you luck," he said very gloomily.

Livvy seemed to read some of his thoughts.

"You were such a long time away, Roly," she said in a low voice. "You sent no word to me. I did not think you would come back. . . . And I was growing old and ugly and very weary!"

She laughed again, as though joy came bubbling into her throat.

"My play-actress days are over. Thank God for that! No more Sunday travelling, no more theatrical lodgings. No more managers with their insults and their beastliness. In another week, Roly, I shall have a little home of my own."

"Who is the man?" said Oliver.

She was listening with her head a little on one side.

There was a sound of brisk footsteps on the stairs, and a bird-like whistle coming higher.

"Here he is!"

There was a tattoo on the door, and Livvy darted across and opened the door wide.

"Base wretch! The muffins are burnt."

"Blame me not. My heart flew faster than my feet, O lady of the shining eyes."

A tall, broad-shouldered young man put his arms round Livvy and hugged her close to him.

Over her hair he saw Oliver, and said, "Shall our caresses be made in the public eye? Is this modesty? Is it respectable?"

He winked at Oliver, whom he had never seen before, and then, releasing Miss Livvy O'Brien, said:

"Introduce me, my dear."

She patted back her hair, and put her hands upon her burning cheeks, and having recovered her breath a little, said:

"Dick, this is Oliver Lumley. I have often spoken to

you about him. Roly, this is Richard Pennington, who is going to be my husband."

"Glad to meet you, sir," said Richard Pennington, grasping Oliver's hand. "Livvy's friends are my friends."

He went down on his knees before the fire and examined the toasted muffins.

"Done to a turn! Come, let us eat, drink, and be merry."

During tea-time Mr. Richard Pennington behaved like a high-spirited schoolboy, and ate a prodigious number of cakes and muffins. He regretted that Oliver had such a poor appetite, and said that he ought to fall in love, for it was the best appetiser in the world. He kissed Livvy's hand when she was cutting bread-and-butter and kissed her on the back of her neck among her little curls, before filling the teapot with hot water.

Oliver was annoyed with the fellow. His overflowing good nature, his hearty laughter, his incessant stream of small jokes, jangled the nerves of a man who had come for Livvy's sympathy and tenderness. He did not stay long after tea, and in answer to Livvy's questions he gave but few details of his life since he had last seen her. Not a word did he say of his marriage.

"We shall be delighted to see you, sir, in our little home," said Mr. Richard Pennington. "We have taken a house on Streatham Hill, 303, Alexandra Road. You will know it by the love-light in the windows."

"Thanks very much," said Oliver.

When he said good-bye he took Livvy's hand outside the door and put it to his lips, as he used to in the old days.

"Good luck and God bless you," he said.

He went swiftly down the stairs, turning once to lift his hat and smile, with a rather wan face, to the girl, who blew a kiss to him. Then he went out into the street again and Melancholy took him by the arm and would not leave him.

## CHAPTER XLVII

### NEARING THE END

OLIVER decided to go over to Streatham Hill and see his own people, though he was afraid to tell them of his tragedy. Yet he knew that sooner or later they must know. Their letters to him at The Rookery would be unanswered, or Virginia would write to them and reveal the truth. It would be better for him to break the news first and explain his side of the quarrel, before Virginia poisoned their minds against him.

He was in an emotional mood when he stood outside the front door of the red-brick villa into which his family had lately moved. On the way he had rehearsed his speech. It would be a confession of folly but also an accusation. He would make them pity him, whatever their measure of blame, because he would show how hard was the nature of the woman with whom he had lived. His mother would take his part. She would see that Virginia was more at fault. By the grace of God, mothers are always against their daughters-in-law.

Even his father would have no patience with a wife who had shut her heart and her house against the husband whom she had sworn to love and obey. His father had good old-fashioned ideas upon the marriage vow.

These thoughts put courage into him, and he gave a sharp rat-tat to the door. But when it was opened by Galatea he saw that she was deadly pale, and weeping, so that he was startled and forgot for a moment his own tragedy.

"Oh, I am glad you have come!" said Galatea in a low voice. "You are just in time."

"What is the matter?"

"Don't you know? We telegraphed for you. . . . Father is dying."

He said, "Good God!" in a whisper, and then his

sister burst into tears and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

" Hush ! " said Oliver. " Hush ! "

He was terribly shocked. On his way home he had been wondering whether he could ask his father to give him the shelter of the old roof, or make another allowance to him until he had got on to his feet again. Now he could never ask another favour of the man who had drudged for them all, and who had never refused any gift within his means.

Galatea took him by the hand and led him into the front bedroom on the first floor. His father lay breathing his life away. A doctor was watching him. Mrs. Lumley was holding her husband's thin hand, while she sobbed quietly. When Oliver came in she looked up at him through her tears and then wept more bitterly. Horace stood by the bedside with a grave face. He gripped Oliver's hand for a moment and whispered, " There is no hope, old boy."

Oliver bent over the dying man and said, " Father, don't you know me ? "

Richard Lumley seemed to look into his son's eyes, struggled a little as though to speak, and then turned his head sideways.

There was silence in the room for a minute, an intense silence, during which Oliver held his breath and did not move. Then the doctor, who had been listening at Richard Lumley's lips, spoke in a low voice :

" He is dead."

Mrs. Lumley and Galatea fell on their knees by the bedside, and Horace took Oliver's arm and led him from the room.

Outside the door it was Oliver now whoburst into tears. The shock had been too sudden and too great. Coming upon the top of his own wretchedness it quite unmanned him, so that Horace was alarmed by his grief.

That night Oliver stayed late and sat holding his mother's hand. She was calm now, except for occasional gusts of tears, and spoke of her husband continually, as though it comforted her to praise him.

" He was always kind and patient. Patient when I was so impatient, Oliver ! He devoted his life to us. He

worked and drudged for us all to the very last. Sometimes I know he was sad because we had to pinch and scrape so much. He wanted to give us more pleasure, more of the joy of life. Oh, now that he is gone I know how much I loved him, and how much he had to forgive in me."

"Nonsense, mother," said Oliver; "he had nothing to forgive you. It was I who always troubled him."

Not a word was said that night about Virginia. Oliver's family imagined that he had come in answer to their telegram. Galatea forgot that he had not received the message, and had come by accident. It seemed that his father had been taken ill the night before with pneumonia, following a sharp chill after riding outside an omnibus on a wet night when coming back from the City.

By a mere chance, Oliver received the answer to their telegram. Horace had gone out to the undertaker's. Galatea and her mother were upstairs in the death-chamber. There came a double knock at the front door, and Oliver answered it. He guessed at once that the telegram had come from Windlesham. He opened the envelope with a strange emotion. On the slip of flimsy paper were the words:

*Oliver is in London. I do not know his address. I deeply regret to hear of Mr. Lumley's illness.*

*Virginia.*

He crumpled up the paper and put it in his pocket, and did not say a word about it to his family. He pretended to himself that he did not wish to add to his mother's grief by dragging out his own miserable secret.

To Horace he said that he was staying in town for a little while to do some work. Of course he would stay to attend his father's funeral.

Horace pressed his hand.

"We must stand shoulder to shoulder."

The two brothers stood shoulder to shoulder by their father's grave three days later, and with them was Charles Hardy, who had come as a friend of the family. Messrs. Cutter & Bodger had sent a representative to the graveside of their employee. He was a ginger-haired

gentleman named Biggs, who was to succeed to Richard Lumley's job. After the funeral ceremony he was lugubriously cheerful.

"It has passed off very well," he said. "There was not a hitch anywhere. It has given me great pleasure to pay my last respects to your poor father, gentlemen, I assure you."

He shook hands with Oliver.

"I have often heard your poor father talk of you, Mr. Oliver. He had a high opinion of your mental gifts. Very high. 'My literary son,' he used to call you."

He laughed in a hollow voice, and said, "Well, I will trot back now. I shall sit on your poor father's stool. One man goes down, another up. Strange thing life—isn't it?"

That night Horace presided over a discussion of ways and means, with Oliver, Charles Hardy, and Galatea in the room. Mrs. Lumley was in her bedroom, weeping.

"What's to be done?" said Horace. "The poor old governor was the bread-winner. I can't afford to keep up this house on my miserable screw."

He looked up at Oliver, and said, "We must all help. I suppose we can count on your assistance, old man?"

"No," said Oliver, "you must not count on me."

There was a silence in the room. Horace raised his eyebrows and said, "How's that?"

"It is quite simple," said Oliver. "I have separated from my wife, and I am almost penniless. In a little while I shall be without visible means of subsistence."

He laughed bitterly at his own grim jest.

But the others could see no fun in it.

For a time they were stricken into silence. Then Horace and Galatea questioned him excitedly, but he would give no details.

"It is no use raking up a miserable story."

"This is the last straw," cried Galatea. "It will break mother's heart."

"We must keep it from her," said Horace. "Oliver and his wife will make it up again."

"We shall never make it up again," said Oliver.

"Oh, Oliver," said Galatea, "what have you been

doing? Virginia is the sweetest woman I know. If you have quarrelled it must be your fault."

"Naturally!" said Oliver harshly. "It is always the man's fault."

They wrangled with each other with their nerves on edge.

Charles Hardy rose and put his back to the fire.

"It is no use throwing words about. I am tremendously sorry to hear of Oliver's new misfortune. It complicates matters. But if I may regard myself as one of the family"—he looked over at Galatea and smiled at her—"I want to propose a little plan."

"Go ahead, old man," said Horace.

It was a simple plan. It appeared that Hardy was in a good position again on another newspaper. The job seemed secure enough. So what was the good of waiting? He would marry Galatea as soon as possible, and Mrs. Lumley could live with them.

"But what about Horace?" said Galatea.

"He will go into diggings, my dear," said Horace quietly, "and be very thankful to know that his mother and sister are happy in a new home."

"I could not bear the idea of your living alone," said Galatea.

She turned to Charles Hardy and clasped his arm, and whispered to him.

"Perhaps Horace would come along too," said Hardy after a moment's hesitation. "The more the merrier."

But Horace shook his head.

"No; when you take a wife, Charles old boy, you don't marry all her relatives."

"Nonsense! You and I would always be good pals. You will be our paying guest, old fellow."

"And how about me?" asked Oliver, with an awkward laugh. "You don't pity me in *my* loneliness, Galatea?"

She shook her head at him.

"You must go back to Virginia."

"Not as long as I live."

Horace and Galatea went up to see their mother, to tempt her to come down to supper, and Oliver was left alone with Hardy.

"Is it a fact that you have quarrelled with your wife?" said Hardy.

"She has quarrelled with me."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"God knows."

Hardy puffed at a pipe.

Presently he leant forward and tapped Oliver on the knee.

"Look here, take a word of advice from an old friend and a future brother-in-law."

"What is that?"

"Pull yourself together. Show that you have some grit in you. Sink or swim by yourself. And for God's sake don't rely on other people to help you over the stiles."

Oliver's face was scarlet.

"Like most people who give advice you are damned impertinent."

"I am sorry you take it like that," said Hardy, very calmly. "A few plain words do no harm at times."

"Keep your plain words to yourself," said Oliver, "or I shall be tempted to knock them between your teeth."

"Steady!" said Hardy. "We went to your father's funeral to-day, and there is a widow upstairs."

Oliver swallowed his rage, for at that moment his mother was brought down by Horace and Galatea. She came up to him and clasped him in her arms and cried again. It was a melancholy evening, and Oliver had no further conversation about his own affairs.

On the doorstep, after he had kissed his mother and sister, Horace gripped his hand and said, "When shall we hear from you again? Let us know how things go."

"You may not hear from me for some time," said Oliver. "Anyhow, don't be afraid; I am not going to sponge on you again."

He thrust his hand into his pocket and said, "Look here, put this towards the funeral expenses."

He handed a few sovereigns to Horace, who stared at him in surprise.

"Don't you want it yourself? Won't it leave you rather hard up?"

"That's all right! Good-bye. Look after the mater."

He walked away, turning back once to wave his hand to Horace, who stood on the doorstep in the light that filtered out from the front door.

"It's getting very near the end," said Oliver, striding away into the darkness.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### THE RESCUE

The end had very nearly come when Oliver met Lady Goldstein on the Thames Embankment.

It was a noble day in January. A keen west wind was whipping the river, and the sun had put a touch of gold on every ripple. The sky was pearl grey, and through a vague mist over Blackfriars Bridge the dome of St. Paul's was suspended in space like a white balloon. The great buildings along the embankment had a glamorous light upon them. An incessant stream of motor-cars swept round the long curve of the roadway. One heard the pulsing heart-beat of the great city and the vague murmur of its million voices.

Oliver stood between the eternal smile of two bronze sphinxes and the shadow of that "great, rose-marble monolith," called Cleopatra's Needle, which once saw the splendour of Egypt under the magnificent Pharaohs and was witness of the ruin of ancient dynasties.

Now the seagulls screamed about it and swooped about it. They were crying for food, shrilly, plaintively. The flutter of their white wings whispered about the obelisk.

Up and down the pavement on each side of a booth on wheels placed below one of the smiling sphinxes shuffled groups of men and women. The sunshine had not warmed their thin blood. The wind did not whip it into the warmth of life. Their faces were pallid, their lips blue. In their eyes was the fierce light of hunger.

One of the men was slapping his chest with a clawlike hand, and it gave out a hollow sound. Another, leaning against the pedestal of the sphinx, coughed so that his whole body shook convulsively. With quick, shuffling steps a man came padding up the Embankment, in broken boots tied up with string. He clutched his rags about

him, as though the wind might tear them from him and send them fluttering away.

" My Gord ! " he coughed, " thought I was late for the bloomin' banquet ! "

The women were in a separate group. Their faces had been branded in the torture chambers of life. Out of their lack-lustre eyes there stared despair.

One of them stood upright against the parapet of the Embankment. Her head was wrapped in a drab shawl, her filthy rags were tied round with a bit of rope. She stood quite still and lifeless. She might have been a mummy taken from its case and placed below Cleopatra's pillar.

Inside the booth on wheels a man with a white apron round his waist took off the lid of a stew-pan, and a rich, fat fragrance stole upon the wind. It set the seagulls screaming with a new agony of desire. It made the nostrils of a hundred hungry men quiver in an ecstasy of expectation. Some of them dribbled at the mouth. They formed up in a long queue, pressing close upon each other's heels.

Oliver Lumley stood watching them. Although he was not in rags (though his clothes were getting shabby) his face had a family likeness to these claimants for a free meal. Like theirs, it was unshaven ; like theirs, it was gaunt, with sharp cheek-bones. His eyes were sunken in the sockets, and stared out sullenly. He had the look of a broken man.

He turned slowly towards the end of the queue, when suddenly a hand was placed upon his arm, and a voice said :

" Oliver ! . . . Oliver Lumley ! "

He started, and turned round, like an animal caught in a trap, and stared into the eyes of Katherine Goldstein.

" I am not Oliver Lumley," he said, and turned away.

But Katherine put her hand on his arm again.

" Oliver, I insist upon speaking to you."

" It is not Oliver," he said again. " You are mistaken in your man."

" Do not talk rubbish, if you please," said Lady Goldstein, and then, looking into his face with eyes stricken

with pity, she said, " Roly, what has happened to you ? For Heaven's sake tell me."

" I am going to feed with the beasts," he said sullenly. " If you interrupt me I shall be too late."

" Come away ! " said Katherine. " Come away ! . . . I will give you something to eat, Oliver."

She held on to his arm, but he said :

" Do not touch me. You do not know where I slept last night. It was where the fleas dance and hold their merry revels."

She took her hand away quickly.

" Let us move on."

" Do you stand between me and my soup ? "

" You want more than soup. You want a friend as well as food. I can see that."

" A friend ? "

He laughed bitterly.

" I am nothing but an appetite. Give me food and I will not ask for friendship."

" Have you come down to that ? "

Katherine in her white furs stared at this unshaven, shabby man as though she saw a ghost in the broad daylight on the Thames Embankment.

" People are looking at us," said Oliver. " For your sake I will move on."

He strode at her side for a few yards and then stopped and said, " Leave me. I am not fit to be in your company."

" My dear boy," she said, with an attempt at sprightliness, " you have got to bear my company for an hour or two at least."

She waved her hand to a passing taxi. It swerved round and pulled up by the kerbstone.

" Now get in quickly. No fuss, Oliver."

He stumbled in before her, forgetting the rules of courtesy. She spoke to the driver.

" Michel's Restaurant, Greek Street, Soho."

Then she sat down opposite Oliver, and her eyes roved over his haggard face.

" You have given me a fright. . . . What is the meaning of this ? . . I could not believe my eyes when I saw you looking so miserable . . . among all those awful people."

"Those people? They are my brothers. We belong to the brotherhood of misery."

In Trafalgar Square he put his hand to the door and said:

"Let me get out. I am not your prisoner. I will not have your pity nor your charity."

"My dear Roly, surely we can have a little luncheon together? I am very bored to-day. I desire your company."

His pale lips curved into a smile.

"You have not lost your wilfulness."

Presently M. Michel was bowing to them both.

"*Bonjour, monsieur et madame! Enchanté de vous voir!*"

They sat down at the very table in the corner where, many months ago, Katherine had smiled to him through the smoke-wreaths of her cigarette.

"I am ashamed," said Oliver.

He looked at his dirty hands, his black finger-nails. He passed his hand over his unshaven chin.

"I am ashamed," he said again in a low voice.

Katherine was studying the bill of fare.

"*Potage, Filets de sole Joinville, Selle de Mouton aux haricots verts.* Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"

"It sounds like Heaven," said Oliver.

He tried to eat decently and to restrain his ravenous appetite. He tried to behave like a gentleman and not like a wolf with lean ribs.

Katherine asked him no questions, and supplied the conversation. She gave him news of old friends. Grattan was out in Egypt. Frank Luttrell was doing work for *The Morning*; Little Frolenko was fiddling in St. Petersburg. She had seen a very good play last night. The plot was most ingenious, until it went to pieces in the third act. . . . It took her half an hour to tell the plot, and Oliver missed the point of it. Several times he laid down his knife and fork to gaze at her.

"You are more beautiful than ever."

She said, "Don't interrupt. . . . The second act was quite the best."

At another time he said:

"It would have been better if I had stayed on the Embankment."

"Did I tell you about Gilbert Verney?" she asked. "He has married a penniless girl, after all."

"Lucky devil," said Oliver.

Then when the coffee was brought and he was smoking a cigarette, she leaned her arms on the table and looked into his face and said, very quietly:

"Now tell me what has happened. Where is your wife?"

His hand trembled as he put down his cup.

"Must you have the wretched story?"

"I must."

"It is fair. You have fed me and I will pay for my meal with the tale. Oh, it is a merry yarn!"

She said, "Begin!" and after a whiff of his cigarette he said:

"I will go backwards. I will begin with last night when I slept in a coffin."

"In a coffin?"

"We were all in coffins—free of charge—I and my brothers of the chain. It was in a free lodging-house down by the docks. I was the last man in. In another minute I should have missed my bed. 'Luck!' I said, but perhaps it would have been better otherwise. I might have died in the night. The wind cut like a knife under Waterloo Bridge. . . . But it was warm in my hell, with the boxes all in a row. The steam from human bodies rose up in rank incense. The foul breath of my fellow-slaves poisoned the air and made it stifling. Do I sicken you?"

"Go on!" said Katherine.

"Some of the men had thrown back their oilcloth blankets. Their bodies were bare. In the dim light their ribs showed out. They were like skeletons in those long black boxes—living skeletons in open coffins. I did not sleep. I lay awake listening to strange sounds. The sounds of sneezing, coughing, wheezing, the piping of a man's bronchial tubes, the whimpering of a boy, the groaning of a man with rheumatism hardly ceased in the night. Once there was silence, but presently I heard a whisper. Some voice said, 'My God!' The whisper seemed close to my ear, and I shivered. . . . It was my own voice. . . . Then the sounds began

all over again, the sneezing, the coughing, the gurgling. I was glad to get out in the dawn. Then hunger came to meet me, and stuck a sharp sword into my side and twisted it. . . . Have you ever been hungry ? "

" Yes ; but not like that."

" No ; not like that. . . . It stabs you with hot knives."

" Begin at the beginning," said Katherine ; " this is the end of the story."

" The beginning ? "

He threw the fag-end of the cigarette into the dregs of his coffee, where it hissed and went out.

" There is no beginning. It goes back to all my unknown ancestors, who bequeathed me their damned weakness and their vice and their folly. Curse them ! "

" Come to recent history," said Katherine. " Your marriage, for example. What about your wife ? "

" My wife ? . . . I have no wife. In the country there is a woman who bears my name. I hate her worse than I hate death."

Katherine said : " Hush ! tell me, tell me."

With his elbows on the table, and his chin propped on the knuckles of his folded hands, he told her the story of his married life. He did not spare himself very much. He laid bare his folly, his selfishness, and his sin. But he pleaded extenuating circumstances. He had meant well. He had loved his wife. He had worshipped her even, until she had turned on him and cast him out. Now he hated her because of her hardness, and because of his degradation. She had deliberately sent him to death and the devil.

Well, that was his story. One of life's little ironies, a rare jest for ladies' tea-tables. Now he must be going —back to a den where he addressed circulars at sixpence a thousand—when luck put them in his way. But there was a keen competition.

" Honest work," he said, " but it makes your hand shake like the palsy, makes you blear-eyed, and gives you a frightful craving for drink."

" You have not yielded to *that* craving ? " said Katherine, drawing a quick breath.

" Not yet. But I am coming to it. One day I

shall plunge into the burning lake to slake my thirst. We all go that way sooner or later."

She said, "You shall not go that way, Oliver."

Then she put her hand out and laid it upon his sleeve.

"Listen to me. You have been frightfully foolish, and worse than that. You will not deny that you deserved some punishment."

"I have been flogged by fate."

"Yes; you have been punished. But have you not taken it like a man? Oh, surely, Oliver, you have taken it pluckily, and like a gentleman. I admire you for that."

"You admire me?"

He laughed mirthlessly, and said, "Then you admire a weak devil who has been broken on the wheel of life and who whimpers at his torture."

Katherine would not admit that he had whimpered. She tried to raise his pride by pretending that he had played the game and taken his licking well and shown grit.

But he shook his head moodily, and said, "I have got no grit in me. I am only aflame with hatred for the woman who calls herself my wife."

Katherine said, "That is the first untrue thing you have said. You think you hate her, because you love and yearn for her. You are tremendously sorry for all that you have done to cause her sorrow. It is only your pride—I do not condemn it—which prevents you from going back and asking her forgiveness."

"I swear to you," said Oliver, "that I will die by slow starvation rather than go down on my knees to her."

"Nobody wants you to go down on your knees, my dear boy," said Katherine in a motherly way. "We don't do that sort of thing nowadays. But I shall be glad when you take her in your arms again."

"That will never happen," said Oliver; but his voice trembled.

That night he lay on a sofa, to his own great amazement, in Francis Luttrell's flat. In spite of his refusals and his shame, Katherine had carried him away in a taxicab to Shaftesbury Avenue, where Luttrell was writing an article for his next day's paper. He rose

in amazement when his visitors arrived, and stared first at Oliver and then at Katherine in a bewildered way.

"Frank," said Katherine, very briskly, "Oliver Lumley, whom you know, has had a bad stroke of luck. He has come right up against it. I want you to put him up for a week and ask no questions. Is that agreed?"

Frank Luttrel held out his hand to Oliver.

"I have known ill-luck myself. I shall be delighted if you will make these rooms your own."

"Well played, Frank!" cried Lady Goldstein.

"I am ashamed," said Oliver. "This is my last humiliation."

He sat down in a chair and burst into tears.

## CHAPTER XLIX

### TWO WOMEN

VIRGINIA had gone to Buntingford House. It was far enough away from Windlesham to elude Miss Purchase and the gossip-hunters, and the old mistress of the house had lulled any suspicion that might be aroused by what she was pleased to call "tarradiddles."

She had driven round on several days in succession to drink tea with Virginia's friends and to spread a report that Oliver was travelling abroad for the sake of his health.

"The poor fellow was very much run down," said Lady Buntingford. "I think Windlesham lies too low for him, and the exhalations of the river affect his lungs. It is very hard on a young married couple—so devoted to each other as our dear Virginia and Mr. Oliver."

"And when the dear child is in a delicate state of health, too," said one of the ladies. "When will Mr. Lumley be back?",

"Quite soon now," said Lady Buntingford. "In his last letter he wrote in the best of spirits."

Virginia was unconscious of her old friend's imaginative flights. She was conscious of very little that was happening about her. The day after her arrival at Buntingford House she was taken ill with a nervous attack, and by the doctor's orders had to lie in bed and remain very quiet.

"She seems to be suffering from some shock," said the doctor. "There are all the symptoms of a nervous breakdown. She ought not to be worried by visitors."

"And she shall not be," said Lady Buntingford, "even if I have to lower the portcullis to keep 'em out."

She kept out even Miss Purchase, who drove over from Windlesham one day in a hired brougham.

"I regret, my dear Penelope," said the old lady, "that by Dr. Hogg's strictest instructions she may not receive visitors. I am very much grieved to tell you this, but there is tea laid in my sitting-room, and you will find all the weekly papers."

"But, my dear Susan," said Miss Purchase, "I am not a visitor, I am one of Virginia's most intimate friends."

"It is just her intimate friends from whom I am guarding the child," said Lady Buntingford firmly. "Now, I trust, my dearest Penelope, that you will not argue the matter. The one thing that makes me lose my manners is argument."

"Believe me, Susan Buntingford," said Miss Purchase with dignity, "that I do not intrude myself where I am not desired. I wish you a very good afternoon."

It took all Lady Buntingford's graciousness to prevail upon the little lady to stay to tea.

As the days passed the old Countess became very anxious about Virginia. She seemed to have lost all strength, and to be weeping herself into the grave. Often at night when Lady Buntingford, in a dressing-gown and with a night-cap tied over her white hair, crept into her room, she was shocked to hear Virginia's sobs and to find her pillow wet with tears.

But what was more shocking to her was Virginia's absolute refusal to go in search of the husband, who was now lost to his world.

"When he calls to me I will go to him," said Virginia.

Letters had come from Oliver's family—tragic letters from Mrs. Lumley, who had now heard of the separation between her son and his wife. No one had seen a sign of Oliver since his father's funeral. Mrs. Lumley wrote bitter words to her daughter-in-law, and accused her of having driven Oliver to desperation.

*For God's sake,* she wrote once, *have mercy on my poor boy. I am tortured with anxiety.*

Virginia wrote back:

*Oliver has had no mercy on me. I also am tortured. But I know him well enough to wait for his appeal. When*

*he is really in want he will write for money and help. He has no strength of endurance. I am dreadfully sorry for your unhappiness, dear Mrs. Lumley. Oliver has made us all suffer.*

Unknown to Virginia, advertisements were inserted by Lady Buntingford in the agony columns of *The Morning Post.*

Oliver. Come back, and all will be forgiven. Virginia waits for you.

Oliver. Your wife is pining for you. Do not delay.

But no answer came from Oliver. It did not occur to Lady Buntingford that he might be reading *The Daily Mail* instead of *The Morning Post.*

Virginia baffled the old lady and uprooted all her convictions on love and married life and the nature of women.

That she was fretting herself to death was clear enough. That she was yearning for the home-coming of Oliver was, as Lady Buntingford said, as plain as a pikestaff. She did not deny that she loved him, in spite of all his faults, yet with a strength of will that seemed uncanny in a woman so frail and nervous, she refused to forgive him until he had atoned.

"What d'ye mean by this atonement?" cried Lady Buntingford, with exasperation. "In Heaven's name, if you love the man, hug him tight. Love! Love! In my young days it meant obedience to one's husband and blindness to his faults. What bee have you got in your bonnet, Virginia?"

"You do not understand," said Virginia. "How can I make you understand? It is because I love my husband as I have hope for my own soul that I want him to be an honest man. He was careless of everything so long as he lived on my money. He did no work. The very fibre of his nature was becoming sapped by this idle life, and by continual shirking of his moral duty. I know he is weak. It is only suffering that can make him strong. Oh, I hope he is suffering very much!"

"If I did not know you were the tenderest soul alive I should say you were a heartless hussy!"

That expressed the true dilemma of Lady Buntingford, who could find no key to these contradictions between harshness and tenderness, between a desire to punish and a desire to forgive, between contempt and love.

She would have been puzzled if she had overheard the prayers which Virginia offered up for her husband by night and day, on her knees, with her arms outstretched upon the bed.

She cried out to God to have mercy on Oliver Lumley, yet not to spare his chastisement.

"Break up his selfishness. Set truth in his heart. Give him courage and manhood. Let him come out of the fire cleansed and brave. Send him back to me, dear Lord, that I may have my life again. It would have been easy for me to have kept him by my side. For my money's sake he would have stayed. But he would have gone from weakness to weakness and from shame to shame. I have denied myself his love in order to save his honour. Because we are one I share his punishment. Because I am the woman it is harder for me. But oh, my dear God, bring my boy back soon, before we have suffered beyond our strength."

Such prayers—strange, pitiful, imploring—went up from Virginia's heart during many hours of the day, until she was exhausted with emotion and torn with agony. But though Oliver was lost to her, though no word came from him, she had an absolute conviction that he would come back. She waited for a sign, for an appeal, for Oliver's cry for forgiveness. And one day the sign was given to her.

It was towards the second month of his absence, and she was in the drawing-room of Buntingford House, turning over some papers and just glancing at their pictures. Suddenly she gave a cry, for there on her lap was her husband's name, in black type upon a printed page.

"THE MAN WHO MEANT WELL"

"By Oliver Lumley"

It was a short story, and she read it with burning eyes.

It was the story of a young man of weak character, thoroughly amiable, desiring to make everyone happy about him, and conceited with his own good-nature. But he became entangled in a mesh of lies, which had begun with one white lie to save hurting the feelings of the woman he loved. His amiability of temperament led him into follies which caused more grief to the people about him than if he had been deliberately wicked. He was brought to the depths of ruin by sheer weakness of character, and standing alone in his misery he cursed the nature with which he had been born, and cried for strength to kill the smiling devil in him which had lured him over the precipice.

The story filled only one page of a weekly paper, but in a brief space Oliver had told the story of his own soul. It was the *Apologia pro vita sua*, and Virginia read the words through a mist of tears.

"Oh, my dear husband!" she cried. "At last he has seen the truth!"

"The truth? What is truth?" said Lady Buntingford, who had hurried in at the sound of her cry.

"Oliver is coming back to me," said Virginia. "This is his message."

She held up the paper and laughed in a strange way.

"God has worked a miracle!"

"H'm!" said Lady Buntingford doubtfully. "I distrust miracles, especially in a Radical paper. But it seems to have put some colour into your cheeks, my dear."

There was more colour in Virginia's cheeks before the day was out. For in the afternoon she received a visitor, against whom Lady Buntingford did not lower the portcullis after a little preliminary conversation in the hall.

"My squirrel," said the old woman, "here is someone who brings a word from your husband. If you will excuse me I will go and bully my cook, who is a perfect fool."

She had been followed into the room by a lady in a heavy fur motor-coat and blue veil. When she put up her veil she showed a pretty, serious face, with pale gold hair.

"I do not understand," said Virginia, rising from her chair. "Do you bring news of my husband?"

"Yes. Lady Buntingford did not introduce me. My name is Katherine Goldstein. Perhaps Oliver has spoken of me. We were friends. May I sit down, Mrs. Lumley?"

Virginia bowed her head and motioned to a chair.

"Won't *you* sit down?" said Katherine, taking the seat. "It is so much easier to talk like this."

Virginia sat down on the sofa.

"Have you a message for me?" she said. Her face had gone very white.

"Yes. I have motored straight from town. Of course I went to The Rookery first."

"The message?" said Virginia quickly.

"I will give you his exact words: 'Tell my wife that I have been down in the depths, that I have struggled up again, and that I am doing honest work.'"

"Honest work?" said Virginia. "Oh, that is good—if it is true."

"It is true," said Katherine. "He is on a newspaper in Fleet Street."

Virginia gave a long, quivering sigh.

"Did he say anything else?" she said.

"Nothing else," said Katherine.

Virginia sat with her large eyes staring at her visitor, as though she looked farther away than where Katherine Goldstein sat.

Katherine suddenly left her chair, and went down on her knees by the side of Oliver Lumley's wife, and took her hand.

"Mrs. Lumley, he is frightfully sorry. He has suffered most horribly. I found him starving."

"Did he go to you for help?" said Virginia. "Did he ask you for money?"

"No. I met him on the Embankment one day, looking so ill. He was famished with hunger. He had slept the night in a free lodging-house. Yet he would not accept my help. He refused it until I forced it on him."

Virginia clasped her hands.

"Oh, I am glad," she said. "That was a touch of pride."

"He is very proud," said Katherine. "That is why he is afraid to come to you, or to write to you. He is afraid you will think he is crawling back for your money—and not for your love."

"Did he say those things?" asked Virginia.

She seized both of Katherine's hands.

"You are telling me the truth? . . . You are not lying to me? . . . You do not look as if you lied."

"I tell you the truth. Oliver wants your forgiveness, but he dare not beg for it. It is your money which builds up a wall between you. 'I wish to God,' said Oliver, 'that Virginia were as poor as I am. Then I could show her that I have some stuff in me.'"

"Did he say that?" said Virginia, and then she put her arms round Katherine's neck, and said, "Oh, my dear, you make me a very happy woman. You bring me joyful news."

She rose from her chair, and said, "I will go to Oliver now. How soon may we go? . . . I will not let him wait for my forgiveness."

She walked a few steps across the room, and then suddenly swayed, and would have fallen if Katherine had not run forward and caught her in her arms.

## CHAPTER L

### THE RETURN

That evening Katherine sat alone with Virginia, who was very weak after her fainting attack, but quite calm now. The two women talked about Oliver, and Katherine contrived to say what she desired to say, but what was very difficult to say, to the wife of an indiscreet young man.

Virginia held Katherine's hand in her lap, and said, more than once, "You have been very good to Oliver. I can never thank you enough."

After that there was a long silence, but presently Katherine said:

"Oliver is very young. He is only a boy. I think you will have to deal very gently with him. He wants a lot of mothering!"

She laughed, but her eyes were serious when she looked up into Virginia's face.

"Yes," said Virginia, "he is very young. I am so much older than he is. Not only in years, but in heart."

Katherine pressed her hand.

"I know that type of boy pretty well. His good looks and his gay manners are continual temptations to him. He finds it so easy to be popular, and women smile at him. It is hard for him to knuckle down to the duties of life."

"I know. Oliver found it very hard. He will be different now. Please God he will be different."

"I hope so. But, you see a man cannot suddenly jump out of his own skin or change his whole nature. Oliver has had a painful lesson, but he is still—Oliver."

"You mean that he is still weak? Oh, I think he will be stronger! He has been put to the test of courage—my poor boy."

"Your poor boy will still have to face the big difficulties

of life. And there are so many of them. I think he will want all your help, Mrs. Lumley."

"I will give him my help," said Virginia.

"He is so restless. His brain is so active. And he is as sensitive as an untamed colt. He jibs at the bit. He must be ridden on a snaffle. Forgive my horsy slang, but you understand?"

"You mean I was too hard with him, and pulled the reins too tight?"

"I think so," said Katherine.

"Oh!" said Virginia with a little cry. "At first I was like putty in his hands. I had no hardness till he deceived me. Why did he break my ideal of him?"

Katherine spoke with the air of a married woman of long standing to a young wife.

"Your boy was not old enough to settle down in that lonely old house and this quiet old town. There was not enough to keep his mind busy. He needed the bustle of a big town and all its distractions. I can imagine how quiet it is in Windlesham in the winter months. I think I should go mad, or do wicked things myself, if I lived here in the winter. Oliver is like me in that way. He is not cut out for country life. He wants plenty of friends round him, to buoy him up. He gets the hump very badly, I know."

"The hump? What is that?" said Virginia.

Katherine laughed.

"The worst disease of modern life. Boredom with one's own soul. Moody thoughts that whisper like devils in one's ears. Melancholia. It always creeps over a Cockney when he is in the country after the summer has passed. It jumps on his back in the autumn. The intense silence—the darkness—the smell of rotting leaves—the patter of the rain. Oh, for a young heart—London bred—that is all a danger to his moral health."

Virginia was silent. She stared with big eyes into the fire.

"I do not understand those things. But if they are true I must live in town with Oliver."

"You must!" said Katherine. She was a little excited and spoke quickly. "It is absolutely essential for your happiness. Oliver would go to pieces if he

came back to that old house again. There is not enough to do here. Not enough society. Not enough work or pleasure. You must take a house in town. I will find one for you. I will give you heaps of friends. And Oliver will make a career for himself in journalism. That will keep his brain busy. It will bring back his self-respect. Fleet Street does not give a man too much spare time. But he will come back always to a bright home in the heart of the big bustle of life. That will be good for him. That will make a man of him. Then you will be as happy as the day is long. I assure you it is the best and the only plan."

Virginia sighed.

"I shall be sorry to leave The Rookery and the old garden. But for Oliver's sake——"

"Yes, for Oliver's sake!" said Katherine.

And in the secret of her excited little heart she spoke other words:

"That young man ought to be very grateful to me!"

Certainly that young man ought to have been grateful, for there was a smooth path now between him and happiness.

Upon the day following Katherine's visit he came down to Windlesham and drove over to Buntingford House.

He had lost some of his old swagger and gaiety. He was thinner than when he had gone away to London with twenty pounds in a muddy purse. Down in the depths some of the conceit had been knocked out of him. He had come face to face with his own soul, and had not liked the look of it.

Yet he did not come meekly nor in a craven way, to that reconciliation with his wife. He was very well dressed in a suit lent to him by Frank Luttrell. He had a distinguished air, for misery, hunger, humiliation, rage and shame had taken away some of the softness of his boyish good looks, and had engraved new lines upon his face giving it a strength of character.

He shook hands with Lady Buntingford, and said very gravely:

"How do you do? Where is my wife?"

"Hoity-toity!" cried the old woman. "None of your airs with me, young man. Your wife has been next to death's door, and I hope you have come back in a spirit of humility."

She pinched his ears and said, "You wicked young dog! You naughty fellow!"

Then she pulled down his head and kissed him on the cheek, and said, "I am a very glad old woman to-day."

She took him by the hand and led him into her drawing-room and said, "Virginia, here is your runaway. I have done the bullying, so you can do the cuddling."

Then she went out of the room with her old head shaking.

Virginia stood up and looked across to Oliver, who stayed by the door stricken with a sudden sense of shame, which sent a wave of colour into his face. Their eyes lingered in each other's gaze.

Virginia stretched out her arms and came forward a step or two.

"Oliver. . . . Oh, my dear husband!"

He strode forward and put his arms about her and kissed her on the lips.

"Virginia, my poor wife! Forgive me."

That was not what he had meant to say. All the way from town he had been rehearsing his speech to his wife. He had meant to say—"You have caused me two months of torture. You degraded me and humiliated me. You were damnably cruel to me. . . . But I forgive you because you did not understand."

He was to have done the forgiving. He was to be magnanimous and gracious. But now, his wife's white face, the look of yearning in her eyes, the agony that had left its mark upon her, melted him, and shamed him. Her tears moistened his face as he kissed her, and the words she whispered, as she drooped her head upon his shoulder, broke up all the pride in his heart.

"Oliver, I want you. I want the father of the child that is coming quite soon now. Dear heart, let us love each other very much."

The rest of Oliver Lumley's story cannot be written, for

it is still to be lived. He is doing fairly well in journalism and is the author of serial stories in *The Magazine of Romance* which are read by all the nursery-maids. He has a house at Rutland Gate and gives pleasant little dinner-parties, when he wears a velvet jacket. He is somewhat of an authority on life in the underworld, and is scheming out a book on "Human Derelicts." Virginia is happy as the mother of a small babe, and she only frets in secret when Oliver stays late at the Wastrel Club, where he is very popular. Oliver has a comfortable sense of self-satisfaction and is in a good temper with himself and life. That makes him a pleasant companion wherever one may meet him in the town.

THE END

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